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OR,
Rounding Up the Red-River Rustlers.

BY J. C. COWDRICK,
AUTHOR OF "BROADWAY BILLY" NOVELS, THE
"CIBUTA JOHN" NOVELS, THE "OLD
RIDDLES" NOVELS, ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.
THE PARDS IN PERIL.

"SWEET pertaters!"
"What now, Pard Billy?"
"It don't seem possible, Skinny."
"What's that that don't seem possible to ye?"
"Why, that we have been here in Texas close
to five months. It was fall when we came, and
now it's spring."
"It's th' grim fack, none th' less, though, and

there's no gettin' around it. Time has hummed right along, like a jack-rabbit on th' jump."

It was mid-forenoon of one of spring's happiest days.

Broadway Billy and his partner, Skinny, were out on horseback.

They were rigged out in typical cowboy attire, and sat their horses as though born to the saddle.

Some miles out from the buildings of the Millwall Ranch, they were standing and looking idly about them over the green prairie.

Away to the south a dark line of cottonwoods marked the Brazos River. To the east were the ranch buildings, and still further east, a mere speck in the distance, were the buildings of the Maxwell Ranch.

To the north the prairie stretched away, gently rolling, as far as the eye could reach. Here and there a motte of cottonwood timber broke the sameness of the landscape, and a dark line some miles distant in the northwest showed where a mammoth herd of cattle was peacefully grazing.

It was a scene of beauty, but the two lads were now accustomed to it. For nearly five months, as Billy has stated, they had been honored guests at the Millwall Ranch. During that time they had learned to ride, shoot, and throw the lasso, and had become pretty thoroughly accustomed to the manner of life in the wild Southwest. And this was particularly true of Broadway Billy.

"Right you are, my hungry coyote," Billy returned in response to Skinny's last-quoted words. "And we've had a glorious time, too, I would rise to remark. Why, my gay an' festive shad-der, I believe you have gained a whole ounce!"

"And hasn't it struck you that it is about time for us to be taking our leave? Our welcome must be worn threadbare by 'his time."

"Sweet pertaters! Haven't we been trying to tear ourselves away, for months, and haven't they actually forced us to stay on? I begin to feel like one of th' family, myself, pard."

"You are spoony on that black-eyed girl, Petala Vickers, that's what ails you," Skinny boldly accused.

"I wouldn't be ashamed to own it, if such was th' case, that I 'sure ye," declared Billy promptly.

"Well, I couldn't blame ye, Billy, hang me if I could. But we can't fool away much more time here, that's plain. We orter be home and 'tendin' ter business this very minute."

"I know it, Skinny, dear, an' I feel th' full force of your remarks, but we are a good ways from bein' there."

"And we're gettin' no nearer pretty fast, too."

"Haven't we had just a gee-lorious time, though, Skinny? Tell ye what it is, I'm 'fraid I'm spoilt fer business in th' city now. Haven't we had some high old adventures? Forty books wouldn't be ter hold 'em all."

"But I guess they are about at an end here, and I'm glad of it. I never did see such a feller as you for gettin' into trouble, and it's a wonder that we haven't both been killed a dozen times over. How we have come out of some of our diffikillties is a wonder past understandin'."

"We've got more lives than ten cats, Skinny, that's th' secret of it," Billy averred. "They haven't begun to kill us yet, and it's my honest opinion that they'll have a pretty tough job of it when they do begin. We are not so tender about th' feet as we were when we first struck th' West, and I guess we can turn our own cakes now without any outside help."

"But, say, what's th' matter over there?"

"Over where, my attenuated partner?"

"Why, over there where th' cattle's grazin';" and Skinny pointed.

"Sweet pertaters!" exclaimed Billy, "they are runnin' like mad! It's what they call a stampede, I reckon. They are movin' east, too, and if they get mixed with old Maxwell's herd there'll be th' merry dickens to pav."

It was just what Billy had guessed. Some fractious cows in the herd had caused a general stampede, and the whole herd was making off toward the east as fast as the cattle could run.

Of late there had been considerable trouble between the Millwall and Maxwell cowboys. The brands on the cattle of the two owners were somewhat alike, and only the month previous, when the two herds had got together, the cowboys had come almost to a fight while sorting them.

On that occasion, after the work had been done, the two owners had agreed to keep the herds as far apart as possible until a wire fence could be put up between the two ranches. That fence had been begun, but it was nowhere near

completed, and now this stampede threatened to bring about a week's hard work and untold trouble to both parties concerned.

"What be we goin' ter do about it?" Skinny questioned, with much concern.

"That's jest what I'm tryin' ter get through my hair," answered Billy, as he scratched his head.

That long, dark line was fully stretched out, now, and there was no mistaking the movement.

"We've got ter cut 'em off, that's what we've got ter do," Billy suddenly cried. "Git a good grip, Skinny, so's the wind won't waft ye out o' th' saddle, and we're off."

So saying, Billy wheeled his horse toward the ranch buildings, and was off like a young Indian, with a whoop and a yell.

Skinny was as quick as he, and was right along with him.

"How are ye goin' ter head 'em off, though?" he demanded.

"By gettin' ahead of 'em and yellin' like sin, and wavin' our hats," Billy explained. "If we can turn 'em toward th' river, we'll save 'em from gettin' onto old man Maxwell's ground."

"Great ginger! but they'll run us down and trample th' life out of us, Billy, if we get in their way."

"Oh, no, I guess not. But, we've got to risk it. We'll ride right past th' house and sound th' alarm, and on we'll go. We've got time enough ter do it, I guess."

The two lads urged their horses to their best speed, and fairly flew over the firm but springy turf.

"Whoo—oo—oop!" yelled Billy, waving his arms wildly, "but ain't this life worth livin'? It almost makes me wish I was a wild Indian, with no clothes on except one feather in my hair. Oh! I wish I'd been born a Centaur, or whatever you call it, with th' addition of a pair o' wings!"

"You want too much, you do. If you was made a present of th' world, you'd kick hard for a slice of the sky, too. Them cattle is jest a-hummin', Billy."

"Right you are, my gentle kangaroo. They're goin' ter make us hustle ter get around ahead of 'em where we want ter get, goin' by way of th' house. Git up, here, Inspector B., and show us what ye can do."

Mr. Millwall had given the boys the horses they rode, and they were two of the best of his stables, too. Billy had named his Inspector B., because, as he explained it, the horse was a "tall hustler."

The buildings of the ranch drew rapidly near, at the speed the lads were going, and ere long they were at the first of the sheltering cottonwoods, then at the stables, and then they rounded into the well-kept lawn that surrounded the house.

Paul Millwall and his young wife were on the piazza, and bringing his horse to a halt, Billy shouted:

"The cattle are on th' stampede, Mr. Millwall, and are making straight for old Maxwell's."

The young cattle-king sprung to his feet, with a question upon his lips, but Billy and Skinny were off again like the wind, as they had come.

"Confound it!" Paul exclaimed, "how has this happened? I told Raymond to see that such a thing did not occur. Hey, there, Pete!" to a servant who had come running from the stables, "saddle my horse and get him here double-quick!"

The man ran to obey the order, and the cattle-king paced the walk impatiently while he waited.

Billy and Skinny had meanwhile regained the open, and were riding toward the northeast at their hardest speed.

The on-coming cattle were now much nearer, and the thunder-like roll of their thousand hoofs could be distinctly felt and heard. On the north side of the herd, at the head, rode the cowboys, pressing the cattle as hard as they could to make them turn, but seemingly with little effect.

"This is a mighty serious piece of business," muttered Billy, as he looked well over the field. "We have got to go far enough to get at 'em on their nor'east corner, so to speak, Skinny, or we can't do any good. Come, put spurs to that old crow-bait of yours, and git that."

I guess my horse can keep up with yours, any day," retorted Skinny, a little nettled. "We've raced four times, now, and you haven't beat me a length yet."

"That's because yours don't have anything to carry. It makes a difference whether a horse has a man on its back or a shadader!"

The lads were now running squarely in front

of that on-coming sea of hoofs and horns, and any accident to their horses meant almost certain death to them. They were fully awake to their danger, too, but were full of nerve.

"D'ye think we'll fetch it, pard?" Billy presently asked.

"I think we will, if nothin' bu'sts," was Skinny's response.

Billy took a look back and around, to get the full situation into his head so he could measure the chances well.

"There comes Millwall after us," he announced. "He had better look out, for it's simply impossible for him to cross ahead of th' herd. Reckon he won't try it on, however, so no need ter worry— Sweet pertaters!"

"What's broke loose now?" demanded Skinny, at the sudden exclamation.

"There's a man and woman, on horseback, right in th' way of th' cattle, and comin' this way! They haven't seen 'em yet! They'll get caught— Ha! they see 'em now, though, fer they've stopped short!"

Such was the situation.

The man and woman had been riding westward. It was evident that they had not seen the cattle till now, or if they had, that they had not noticed that they were running, which was probable enough.

But, they saw it now, and saw the danger they were in. They paused only for a moment, and then turned and faced north, putting their horses to best speed.

"That's their only chance," muttered Billy. "It is a slim one, though, pard, and it's slimmer fer us. It's goin' ter be nip and tuck, now I tell ye!"

Paul Millwall, the young cattle-king, had stopped, knowing that he could not cross ahead of the cattle, and was anxiously looking to see how Billy and his partner would come out in their mad race. It was, truly, a matter of life and death with them, as he verily believed.

Suddenly an exclamation escaped him.

"Heavens!" he cried, "there are Judge Maxwell and his daughter, Vida, in the same danger! God assist their escape!"

CHAPTER II.

THE PRINCE OF THE COWBOYS.

"T was a thrilling moment. Only those who have witnessed the like, can appreciate it.

Billy and Skinny had now changed their direction a little, and were heading toward the same point Judge Maxwell and his daughter were aiming at.

"That's old Maxwell and his daughter, Skinny, sure's ye live," Billy spoke as they pressed on. "I hope they won't come to any harm, but they've got to do some tall scratchin', I tell ye."

"Yes, and so have we," Skinny reminded, with a terrified look at the bristling array of horns that was sweeping down upon them. "It's about even shake whether we do it or don't. Wish I was seated on that soap-box at th' corner-stand at this minute, and that's regulation truth."

"Pshaw! you're in no danger!"

"Not in any danger! Why, you're crazy!"

"No; you're so thin that there isn't a horn in th' herd sharp enough to impale ye."

"I'm not anxious ter take any chances on it anyhow. Get up, Gotham! Do yer level best!"

"Gotham" was the name of Skinny's horse.

All this time the cowboys were furiously pressing the herd on the north side, near the head, and were slowly forcing them to bend southward, though the turning was so slight as to be hardly noticeable yet.

The race was now hard and determined, so far as the two lads were concerned. If they escaped, it would be by "the skin of their teeth."

The prospect for Judge Maxwell and his daughter was slightly better. They were a little further off, with a direct and consequently shorter distance to cover.

Suddenly a cry of horror escaped Skinny, and looking, Billy saw that Judge Maxwell's horse had fallen, throwing the judge heavily.

Vida was seen to draw rein immediately, and she faced her horse toward the cattle, revolver in hand.

A few rods more would have put them out of danger, but now—how would it terminate?

About the same time there was a shout from the cowboys. The cattle were turning, at last, as they desired.

But, a new danger arose. Some of the cows swerved out behind the cowboys, and headed straight for the fallen horse and the daring girl who stood to defend her father's life.

"Sweet pertaters!" cried Billy, as the main herd swept past, "but that was a close shave!"

I imagined I could feel a dozen or more of th' horns plowing th' skin off my back. But, hello! we ain't done yet!"

This at sight of the straying cattle mentioned.

"It's all up with th' gal and her dad, sure," declared Skinny. "Them cows is bent on mischief, you see if they ain't."

"And so am I," cried Billy, determinedly, as he took his lasso from its place on the horn of his saddle. "Git yer string, pard, and we'll see what we kin do to help th' gal."

There were five or six of the maddened cows, and all were making straight for the brave girl.

The last thing Paul Millwall had seen was the fall of Judge Maxwell's horse. The next moment the cattle came between, and his view was cut off.

The turning of the cattle now forced him to retreat, which he did in all haste toward the rear of the herd, intending to round them, and learn as soon as he could the judge's fate.

"Poor Maxwell!" he muttered; "ten to one he is now trampled to death. And the boys, I could not see whether they got out of danger or not. And what of the young lady? On! Prince, on! We must get around there in haste!"

On plunged the few maddened cows, and after them swept Broadway Billy and Skinny, while now another character was heading in the same direction.

This was Louis Raymond, or "Lariat Louie," as he was better known, the overseer of Millwall's cowboys.

The cattle turning, and he seeing the danger to which Judge Maxwell and his daughter were exposed, Lariat Louie had left the herd to the other man and was riding to the rescue, circling his lasso as he came on.

The revolver Miss Maxwell had in hand was no toy, but a thirty-two five-shooter of modern pattern.

And when the cows came close enough she did not hesitate to use it.

Her first shot brought down one of the animals, her next the same, but the two following missed. The next, however, told, but after that she was disarmed.

Broadway Billy, though, had not been idle, and another of the cows dropped under his fire.

There were now two more of the maddened long-horns to deal with. Both were in exact range of the daring young lady, though, so Billy and Skinny did not fire, for fear of missing and hitting her.

Lariat Louie, however, coming from the other direction, that is, at right angles, emptied his revolver at the cow nearest him, and it dropped.

But, the last of all, the wildest and most ferocious of the half-dozen, was going straight on, on, head down and preparing to gore the horse that barred its way.

"Ride out of range! Ride out of range!" shouted Louie, to the young woman, but she was too horrified now to obey, or else too devoted to desert her post as defender of her father.

Judge Maxwell's horse, meantime, had regained its feet and run off, but the judge still lay where he had fallen, stunned and bleeding.

The critical moment was at hand.

Broadway Billy was pushing after the cow, hard, twirling his lariat over his head as he came, knowing well that every thing depended on his throw.

Half a dozen bounds more he allowed his horse to make, and then out from his hand shot the lasso, with all the force his arm could lend.

A yell of exultation escaped Lariat Louie, as his experienced eye foresaw the result before it was accomplished.

Out and out flew the slender rope from Billy's hand; then it fell and the young lariat thrower jerked his horse to a stop.

The trained animal stopped instantly, its fore legs braced for the shock; the lasso tightened, and the maddened cow was thrown upon its side in less time than it takes to read the words.

The lariat had settled over the animal's head, taking in one of the horns and part of the face.

Lariat Louie himself could not have done better.

"Heaven bless you!" exclaimed Vida Maxwell, fervently; "you have saved my life. I shall not forget it."

"Well done! Well done!" shouted Louie, as he came dashing up. "Billy, we'll dub you Prince of the Cowboys, sure as you live!"

"Oh, it was nothin' but dumb luck," responded Billy, modestly, keeping a tight rope on the struggling cow.

Louie fired a couple of shots into the beast, dispatching it at once, and then springing from his horse he ran to Vida Maxwell and offered his hands.

She sprung from the saddle, and Broadway Billy witnessed a brief but fervent embrace.

The next moment the fair girl was kneeling at her father's side.

Judge Maxwell was just coming to, and was looking about him in a dazed way.

Skiuny, seeing his horse some distance off, had set out to capture it, having no other part to play that he could discover.

"Where am I? What has happened?" Mr. Maxwell asked, as he sat up. "What are we doing here, Vida?"

"Why, don't you remember the cattle?" the daughter asked. "We were running to get out of their way, you know, and your horse fell and threw you."

"Yes—yes; now I recall it all. And are we safe? Has the herd gone by?"

"We are all safe now," Vida assured. "We owe our lives to this brave boy, too, papa."

She indicated Broadway Billy as she spoke.

"Say, draw that a little mild," Billy requested, actually blushing.

Mr. Maxwell wanted the particulars, and they were soon given, and by that time he was able to stand.

As his strength returned, so did his temper, and when he was on his feet he roughly demanded:

"Where's my horse?"

"My pard has gone after it, sir," said Billy.

"Um! Confounded cattle! I expect they are all mixed up with my own by this time, and that we'll have a dence of a time with 'em again. It's pig-headed work, and that's what it is, letting 'em stampede. That foreman of Millwall's isn't worth the rope to hang him with, I vow!"

"Naturally, sir, I can't agree with you on that point," observed Louie, speaking for the first time and making his presence known to the recovered man. "It was no fault of mine that the cattle got started. But we have turned them, and they are yet on our own ground."

"That's your story. You couldn't work for me, my man, and that I'm telling you in plain English. This is the second time this thing has happened."

"I am not asking work of you, sir," retorted Louie, and he turned away.

The herd was now a long distance off, and Paul Millwall was seen approaching in one direction, while Skinny was coming up in the other with the recaptured horse.

Lifting his hat politely to Vida Maxwell, Lariat Louie sprung to his saddle and rode out to meet his employer.

The young lady gazed after him with fond eyes until her father's harsh voice recalled her.

"Don't be looking after that worthless fellow," he ordered, "but let me help you on your horse."

Vida was assisted to the saddle, and then they awaited the coming of Skinny with the judge's animal.

When Lariat Louie met the young cattle-king, Paul first inquired about the persons who had been in such danger, and then about how the mad run had come about.

Louie told the particulars of the exciting adventure, and how Broadway Billy had played the role of hero, and added:

"As to how it came about, I believe Dirty Jack, the half-breed, had something to do in it, and I'm going to find out. If he did, it won't be well for him."

They talked for some minutes, and then parted, Lariat Louie going on in the direction the herd had taken, and the cattle-king riding forward to greet the judge and his daughter, and to congratulate them upon their escape.

When he came up to where they were standing, Skinny had just brought in the truant horse, and the judge was getting into the saddle.

CHAPTER III.

MAXWELL DROPS DARK HINTS.

LYCURGUS MAXWELL was past fifty.

He was widely known as "Judge" Maxwell. The title was wholly complimentary, however, for he had never held that honorable office.

He was a cattle man, like Paul Millwall, and, as has been stated, the ranches of the two joined each other. The Millwall Ranch was considerably the larger, and much the better.

Owing to a fondness for gambling, the judge's fortune fluctuated. Sometimes he would be "rolling in wealth," with his star of prosperity riding high, and then again he would be away "down at the heel," with his ranch heavily mortgaged. He was about in the last-named condition at this time.

Paul Millwall raised his hat to Vida, as he rode up, and addressed her father.

"You had a bad fall, judge," he greeted, "and I congratulate you upon your fortunate escape."

"It was your confounded cattle that did it," was the snappish response. "What are they doing in a stampede again so soon? That foreman of yours is about as good as nobody, in my opinion."

Paul smiled, taking no offense at the words.

"We hold different views about that," he returned. "I am sorry enough that the cattle placed you in danger, but I do not believe it was any fault of Raymond's."

"Yes, we do hold different views," the judge snapped. "I wouldn't have such a fellow on my place twenty-four hours."

"By the way," and the young cattle-king dropped the matter suddenly; "which way were you going, judge?"

"Why, we set out to visit you," was the response, "but now my temper is so disturbed that I think we had better turn about and go back home. I'm in no mood to make myself agreeable, I tell you."

"Oh, that will wear off, presently. Come, and we'll go to the house, and when you have washed and brushed up you will feel like a new man."

"Well, I'll go on with you, but I warn you that I'm out of temper—badly out, too."

They started forward at a walk toward the Millwall Ranch mansion.

"Raymond tells me you had a narrow escape, Miss Maxwell," Paul observed.

"Indeed, yes!" the girl exclaimed. "Only for Broadway Billy, I might not now be alive to tell of it. Certainly my horse would be dead."

"You are a young chief, Billy," the cattle-king complimented, turning to him. "You can handle the lasso better than some men who have been on the plains for years. Some never get the right knack."

"It was all dumb luck," Billy still protested. "I couldn't do it again in a hundred trials."

"Yes, you could, too," Vida persisted.

"I have found that modesty is one of your merits, my lad," declared Paul. "I venture to say the boys will find a suitable name for you for this day's work."

"He has been dubbed already," cried Vida.

"That so! What have you knighted him?"

"Oh, it was not I, but Lariat Louie. He said they'd dub him Prince of the Cowboys."

"Just the thing! That's your handle, Billy, my boy."

"I want ter chirp my chirp in gentle protest, observed Billy. "I'd a heap ruther you'd wait till I'm dead, and then 'grave all my greatness on my monnymen. I am a bashful feller, at best, and I don't want to be prematurely bald-headed."

Paul and Vida laughed.

"What are you talking about?" Paul asked. "What has your title got to do with any danger of your becoming bald?"

"Why, if anybody called me Prince of Cowboys I'd blush so hard that it would burn my hair off, you see. I hope you won't do it, really."

Billy's manner was so droll that all had to laugh.

Of course the two lads were acquainted with the Maxwells, having lived "next door" to them, as Billy expressed it, for many months.

When they reached the house they found Erica, the young cattle-king's pretty bride, standing on the piazza with a field-glass in hand.

"Where is the herd?" Paul asked.

"Over there, not far from the Brazos," was the response, and she pointed off to the southwest. "They have stopped, and the boys have rounded them up."

"Good enough. I guess all danger is over for this time, judge. This little run has damaged my herd a thousand dollars, though, I suppose."

Paul dismounted and helped Vida to the ground while the judge was getting out of the saddle, and a man appeared to take the horses.

"I guess we'll ride over to the herd, Mr. Millwall," observed Billy.

"Just as you like," was the friendly response. "The whole ranch is yours, so do as you please."

Billy and Skinny rode off, and Paul led his guests into the house.

In half an hour the judge had refreshed himself, and was seated with Paul on the broad piazza, smoking. All the dirt and blood had disappeared, and he looked as good as new.

"Yes, it was a narrow escape," he was saying, "but of course it was no fault of yours, Millwall, and if I said any unpleasant things when I was in hot temper I am willing to apologize now."

"Oh, never mind anything you said, sir," waived Paul. "You could not be expected to

be in good temper after your fall. We'll say no more about it."

"That New York boy of yours did a good piece of work in roping that cow just as it was going to gore my daughter's horse. He has learned to handle the lariat quicker than any fellow I ever heard of."

"That boy is a wonder," declared Paul, in earnest. "He will be a terror, ten years from now."

"A terror? What do you mean by that?"

"Well, in ten years he will be thirty, or near it, and if he hasn't made his mark in the world by that time, I miss my guess. You speak of the way he roped that cow; he is ten times worse at roping rascals. As I have told you before, and as you know, he is a detective born—a Hawkshaw from the cradle."

"He is a sharp lad, and no mistake. But, say, why don't he try his hand on these Red River Raiders?"

"That is a thing I would talk with you about," observed Paul. "Something has got to be done about that matter. These raids are growing too bold and frequent to be pleasant. Only the other night my boys reported another loss out of my herd."

The judge smiled in an insinuating way.

"We might not have to look far from home to get hold of some of them—the raiders, I mean," he observed.

"What do you mean now?" Paul demanded.

"Well, to be frank with you, it wouldn't surprise me to learn that some one in your own employ is in league with the outlaws."

"Is your mind fixed upon any particular one?"

"Not knowing anything, I can't accuse," the judge returned, "but I tell you candidly that if I were you I would get rid of that foreman as soon as possible."

The young cattle-king showed annoyance and displeasure.

"Do you know anything against him?" he inquired.

"As I said before, I don't," was the answer; "but I have heard vague hints among my cowboys about his double dealing."

"I don't believe it!" the young cattle-king exclaimed. "I have known Lariat Louie too long to be mistaken in him. It is possible that there may be traitors in my camp, but he is not one. I know him to be a true man, in every sense of the word."

"Well, I hope I'm mistaken, that's all. But, as you were going to say about the Red River Raiders?"

"We must organize and hunt them down, if they keep on."

"I agree with you, and I'm ready to help whenever the time comes. But, by the way, Millwall, I came over here on a matter of business."

"Well, sir, say what it is, and if there is anything I can do for you, I will do it."

"You better not be too liberal with promises, my boy, or I may take you at your word, and in a way to astonish you."

"Well, that is my word for it anyhow," Paul declared. "I say anything that I can do for you. If you ask an impossibility, that's another thing."

"Well, I'll tell you what I want, and then you can consider it. I am in hard luck again and Humbert Voorbees holds a mortgage on my ranch for close upon its full value. I wanted to see if you won't lift it for me, and hold it till I get on my feet again."

"How much is it, sir?"

Judge Maxwell named the amount.

"Impossible," Paul declared at once. "To raise that sum, at present, I would have to get a loan myself. Can't do it. You see, my buying the old Rosedale Ranch has shortened my purse greatly. Sorry, but so it is."

"Perhaps you would not do it if you could."

"I have done similar favors for you before, judge. I admit, though, that I would not be anxious to hold a mortgage of that amount. I would help you, though, if I had the means handy."

"Well, if you can't do it, of course you can't. You see, I want to get it out of his hands if I can."

"I shouldn't think he would press you very hard. It's another of your misfortunes at cards I suppose."

"Yes, luck went against me bad. I have a reason for wanting to get the debt into other hands if I can, you see."

While they were thus talking, a horseman rode into the yard.

He was a dark-faced but rather good-looking man of perhaps thirty-five. He was well dressed and wore a broad-brimmed white felt hat.

The young cattle-king and his guest looked up as he approached the piazza, and Paul exclaimed:

"Why, here's Voorbees, now."

"How are you, gentlemen?" the new-comer cried, as he sprung from his horse.

"Judge by our appearance, as we do by yours that you are pretty well," responded Millwall.

"I called at your house, judge," the man explained, as he came on the piazza, "and learning that you had come over here, I have made bold to follow. I hope I don't intrude."

"Not at all," assured Paul; and he motioned a man to take charge of the horse.

Just as Voorbees had taken a seat, the ladies, Mrs. Millwall and Vida Maxwell, came out of the house. Both were laughing, but at sight of Voorbees the laughing ceased on Vida's lips, the smile fled from her face, and she grew pale for a moment, turning quickly red in turn. She halted, as though to draw back, but it was too late, then, and she allowed her hostess to lead her forward

CHAPTER IV.

BILLY IN A LASSO.

HUMBERT VOORBEES rose with an air as though of determination to rival the great Chesterfield.

"Have I entered some enchanted hall?" he queried. "This vision of loveliness would seem to warrant the belief, surely."

As he uttered the words he made an elaborate bow.

Mrs. Millwall laughed lightly, while a look of half disgust appeared upon the fair face of Vida Maxwell.

"It is anything but an enchanted hall," Mrs. Millwall responded, "but it is the next thing to it, perhaps—a happy home."

She offered her hand, thus giving the welcome due to her husband's guest of the hour.

Voorbees said another soft nothing, and turned to Miss Maxwell.

"I found your home dark and cheerless enough, Miss Maxwell, and I can understand the brightness I find here. You brought the life and light of the house away with you, and are lending luster to this always sunny spot. No wonder I was dazzled."

"I assure you none of the brightness emanates from me," Vida responded, coldly.

There was a further brief exchange of words all around, and the ladies turned and walked away to the flower garden.

"Your greeting of Mr. Voorbees was not very warm," observed Erica.

"I detest him utterly!" Vida snapped.

"He is good-looking, and immensely rich, and I am inclined to think he is in love with you."

"So he is, or so he says, anyhow, as far as he is capable of loving."

"Then I did not miss my guess, did I."

"No. He is as senseless as good-looking, though, and as silly as rich. Oh, I hate him!"

"Then I imagine his love is hopeless, if he hopes to marry you."

The two were such warm friends that they could talk thus freely.

A dark cloud came over Vida's face.

"I do not know!" she murmured.

"You do not know!" in surprise.

"No, I do not, scarcely."

"Why, how is that?"

"Papa wishes me to marry him."

Erica was silent some moments before speaking again.

"You must pardon me, Vida," she presently said. "I did not suspect anything of this, and you will think I have been drawing you out purposely. I began it in jesting."

"Oh, I meant to tell you, dear; and there is nothing to pardon, anyhow. Yes, papa wants me to marry him, and that within the month."

"Indeed! This is surprising!"

"You see, papa has foolishly let him get a heavy mortgage on the ranch, and he promises that if I will marry him he will destroy the papers and set papa free of the debt."

"And you will not do it, eh?"

"I do not want to do it, but if I do not, papa is ruined."

"Can your father not find some one to help him out of the trouble?"

"It is for that purpose that he has come over to see Mr. Millwall, I believe. I can see that he does not want to use force with me, and that he desires to find some other way of escape if he can."

"How unfortunate! I do not believe Paul has the money to do it, now."

"I do not know what to do. If I marry him, I blight my own happiness forever, for I detest the man. If I do not marry him, poor papa will

not have a home after this month. What would you do?"

"It is hard to tell, for of course you love your father as dearly as I love mine, and I am sure I would almost give my life for him. You will pardon me if I speak plainly?"

"Yes, certainly."

"I presume it is your father's own fault that he is so in debt."

"Yes, that is true, but that does not soften the hardness of the situation, you know."

"No, of course not, but then he is asking a good deal of you, wanting you to suffer for his own imprudence—to use no harsher word."

"But he does not look upon it in that way. He is willing to let me escape if he can, but really he thinks it a very desirable match for me. And I suppose a good many others would think the same."

"Yes, very naturally, for, as I said, he is good-looking and immensely rich, or is said to be."

"But I do not love him, or even respect him. Quite the contrary. It would be a sin to marry with such a feeling in my heart, don't you think so?"

"It would not be right, there is no question about that. Whether you will make the great sacrifice or not you must determine for yourself. I must not advise you, dear Vida."

"Since you speak so, I well know what your mind is. You would not do it, were you in my place. Oh, what shall I do? I would not have accompanied papa, only I wanted to talk with you about this very thing. Can't you tell me what I ought to do?"

"I will tell you frankly that you have guessed what I think you ought to do, but whether I would do that or not I do not know. A daughter's love is strong. Still a father's love ought to be as strong, and if you lay the matter before your father exactly as it is, he—"

"I have done that. He laughs at my nonsense about love, as he calls it, and says I will learn to love, all in good time."

"Then there is but one thing to be done."

"And what is that?"

"To buy up that mortgage, somehow."

"Yes, but he will not sell. The only way is for papa to get the money to take it up."

"That is bad. But, who is your father's lawyer?"

"Higgsworth, of Bowie."

"And how many days of grace have you now?"

"Only about five, I guess."

"That is bad, decidedly bad. Still, hope on, and I'll see if I can do anything to help you. Do not give your decided answer until the very last hour of the very last day."

"Oh! I am so glad you will try to help me!"

"It is for your own sake that I do it. Keep up your courage."

Their conversation ran on, but as the rest of it is foreign to the immediate interests of our story, we will leave them for the present and follow Billy and his slender partner.

They had set out at good speed in the direction of the herd, and as they rode along Billy observed:

"Well, little one, I thought you said our adventures here were about at an end. That scrimmage we just had does not look like it, does it?"

"No, not 'zactly, but then that ain't likely ter happen again in a thousand years. That was th' dyin' flicker of th' hull business here, I guess. That was th' grand wind-up of our Texas campaign."

"I don't know about that. But, we'll see. By th' way, my slender jack-rabbit, I wish you would ride closer by me."

"What d'ye want me closer by ye for?"

"Why, when you're off more'n half a dozen yards I can't swear whether you're in th' saddle or not, you're so thin."

"Oh, you git out! I've a notion to set to work and get fat, just to shut you off on that old chestnut about my thinness."

Billy laughed merrily.

"You get fat!" he exclaimed; "you couldn't do it. There's not enough of you to begin on. You fat! Ha, ha, ha! I'd like to see how you would look with a layer of fat on ye, Skinny, and that's a fact."

At that instant Billy's quick ear caught the sound of a peculiar "whirr" in the air, and he half-turned just as the noose of a lasso fell over him and drew tight around his arms, almost jerking him from the saddle.

He spoke to his horse instantly when he felt the rope, and the animal obeying promptly was the only thing that saved him a fall.

At the same moment a voice called out:

"Throw up your hands, you grinning skeleton, or a bullet will settle your bones for you!"

This was addressed to Skinny, and he found a Mexican at his horse's head with a revolver in hand.

He obeyed the order without any parley, and looked to see what had become of Billy, since he had ridden some yards past him.

Billy was in the saddle, but the lasso was tight around him, and at the other end of the lasso, some distance off, stood a Mexican youth whom Skinny recognized as one of Mr. Millwall's employees.

This fellow's name was Bartolo Tabano, and he and Billy had never "cottoned" to each other. The man who held the revolver aimed at Skinny was one the lads had never seen before.

"Sweet pertaters!" Billy cried, as soon as he took in the situation, "what d'ye mean by this, you dirty young Greaser! Let me get my hands free, and if I don't stand you on the corner of you ear you can kick me. What d'ye mean by it?"

"It means that you have got to fight, that's what it means," was the bold return.

"Oh! it does, eh? Well, I'm willin' to accommodate ye, you bet! I was never fuller of fight in my life than I am at this minute. I'm as mad as a hornet, fer you might have broke my neck if you'd jerked me out of th' saddle as you tried to do."

"You'll get more fight than you want. Disarm him, Antonio, and then I'll do him up."

The Mexican man, still holding Skinny covered, took Billy's revolver from his belt, and then loosened the lasso.

"Now," he ordered, "down with you and take your punching. I'll see that his pard don't interfere, Bartolo."

"All right! You keep him covered about one minute, that's as long as I want to do th' job in."

"You won't want that long, you smut-colored son-of-an-apel!" cried Billy. "I've been itchin' ter get at you, and now you've put your foot right in it. I'd like ter know what th' fight is about, though, afore we begin."

"I can soon tell ye what it is about," cried the Mexican lad. "It is about my Petala, and that's what Petala Vickers was my girl till you come here, and now she has gone back on me. If she's bound ter have you, I'll let her see how you look with black eyes and broken nose. I'll make her ashamed of you."

"Sweet pertaters! That's where your pain is, is it? Wade right in, then, and take all th' satisfaction you want. Oh, this is fun, now, you bet!"

CHAPTER V.

BILLY'S BOLD BATTLE.

DURING all his sojourn at the Millwall Ranch, Billy had had no occasion before to show his prowess as a fighter. Hence the Mexican did not know the kind of opponent he was about to tackle, but thinking himself quite handy with his fists, had no doubt but he could "do up" the boy from the East.

"I have been wantin' to get just this kind of a hack at you," Bartolo declared, "but as you're a pet of th' family I didn't want to spile your beauty and git bounced fer it. But, when I seen you out walkin' with Petala last night, it made me so mad that I made up my mind I'd do it anyhow."

"Well, you ought to be able to do it," Billy observed, "seeing the help you have brought with you."

"Oh," cried the pugnacious lover, "Antonio ain't here to help me, but to see that your pard don't interfere."

"That's all, eh? Well, wade in, now, and have it over with. I can't stay here and monkey with you all day. I want to go over to the herd."

"You won't feel much like going there when I get done with you, you'll find out. You'll find out that no galoot from New York can come here to Texas and do as he pleases."

Though a Mexican, the lad had been reared in Texas, and his language was that of the American soil.

"All right," returned Billy, "I'm willin' to learn anything that my prove useful to me. But, stop chinnin' about it and wade in. If I've got to take a lickin' I don't want to have th' agony of suspense too long drawn out. I want to have it over and done with as soon as possible."

"Here goes for you, then!" and the Mexican youth sprung forward and put his arms in position.

Billy put up his fists with lazy coolness, and waited for the attack.

Bartolo swayed forward and back and to and fro, slightly, moving his arms as he did so, as though considering where he had better plant his first blow.

The boy from New York stood perfectly still, his arms in position, and ready for anything that might follow. There was a light in his keen black eyes that boded ill for Master Tabano.

Suddenly the Mexican lad drew back his right arm, and then it shot forward in a heavy stroke, aimed at Billy's front face.

But, the blow never reached its mark. Billy's left fist went out straight from the shoulder, with no effort at all, seemingly, and it caught Bartolo right between the eyes.

There was a spiteful smack, as fist met face, and over went Bartolo, landing flat upon his back.

Carried forward by the power of his own blow, he had lent all the force necessary to make Billy's effective.

"How is that for high?" cried Skinny, delighted. "That's th' way we do it in New York. Billy got in a short cut while you was goin' around."

"You shut up," ordered the Mexican man. "That wasn't fair, nohow. You hit him afore he was ready," to Billy.

"That's a peculiar way I have of doin'," observed Billy, coolly. "Come again, my jumpin' frog, and see if you can't do better."

The enraged lover was coming. He was now on his feet again, and was rushing right in—and the ex-gamin was there to meet him, with the result that, in less than two seconds, Bartolo was again laid on his back.

Billy's right this time had found him, and over he went.

"That was no fair!" cried the Mexican who held Skinny covered. "You have got to fight fair, or I'll take a hand in."

"You will, will ye?" exclaimed Skinny. "Not this round, I reckon! You drop that shooter, or I'll drop you!"

With a curse the Mexican dropped his revolver and put up his hands.

He had looked away from Skinny, and that slender but sprightly youth had taken advantage of the opportunity and reversed the order of things.

"Bully fer you, Skinny!" cried Billy. "We'll show 'em what it costs to jump two New York immigrants. You keep him covered till I'm done with this lizard, and then if he wants some too, I'll accommodate him. A little practice will keep my hand in, you know. Come, Smutty, get up here and take the rest of your medicine. Half a dose won't do you any good at all."

"You don't mean ter say you'll fight me, do ye?" the man demanded.

"Wby, cert," assured Billy. "You can be gettin' ready."

"Well, you kin bet that I'll do ye up."

"All right, you're welcome to try it on, butternut."

Bartolo was now upon his feet again, and was coming, but this time not with so much of a hurry. There was a big lump on his forehead, and his right eye was fast closing up. He realized that he literally had caught a Tartar.

"I'll fix ye this time," he threatened. "I'll show ye a trick that will wake ye up, you see if I don't! I'll make ye see stars, or my name ain't what it is, and that I'm tellin' ye!"

"All right, come right along, my hearty, and I guess I can stand it as long as you can. You want to get in your fine work pretty quick, though, for your eyes won't be open long."

"I'd like ter see you close 'em for me. You have got in two whacks, but you won't get in another. I know yer dodge now, and you can't fool me again."

"I can't if you don't come near enough, that is sure," agreed Billy.

"You'll find me nearer than you want me, afore ye know it."

"I want ye near enough to hit ye, that's all."

"Well, here I am."

He thought he saw an opening, and sprung to take advantage of it, but he fell into a trap. The opening was only one that Billy had made purposely, and when Bartolo got there it was gone.

Instead, there was Billy's iron-like fist to greet him again.

It was of no use. William o' Broadway was able to whip him without trouble, and two or three more just like him. He had not been kicked around the streets of New York all his young days to be "waxed" by a Greaser.

This time Bartolo's other eye suffered, and he sat down as gracefully as the circumstances would allow.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Skinny, "that's th'

real old time way, Billy. That's the way to give him Hail Columbia! Come right up and get some more, Barty; do come!"

"I guess Barty will soon have enough," observed Billy. "If not, he'll have to wait a week till he gets his eyes open again. What do you think about it, Mr. Antonio? You came along to see fair play: do you think he's had it?"

"No, I don't," was the snapped retort. "You hit every time afore he was half lookin' fer it. You tackle me, and let me show ye a trick or two."

"If he wasn't lookin', that was his fault. Say, you Mexican bantam, are you satisfied? Have you had all you want?" to Bartolo.

Bartolo was upon his feet again, but there was no more fight in him. He saw that he could do nothing with Broadway Billy.

"You have got th' best of it this time," he admitted, nursing his damaged eyes, "but this don't settle it. I'll have it out of ye yet, and don't forget it."

"No time like the present," said Billy. "If you don't feel fully satisfied, come right up and get more. I hate to have customers go away dissatisfied, for it is hurtful to trade. You'd better come and let me make a good job of it."

"No; I can't fight no more now, but I'll fix ye, see if I don't."

"All right, only let me know when you are ready to begin th' operation, so I can take a hand in it. I don't want to miss my share of th' fun, you know."

"You'll know when I begin, so don't let that worry you."

The Mexican youth had his hands full now, attending to his bleeding nose and damaged eyes, and was out of the fight.

"Now," said Billy, "did I understand you to say that you want some of th' same kind of treatment?" turning to the man, Antonio.

"That's what I did say," was the growled out answer, "and that's what I mean, too. You'd better git out of yer coat."

"As I don't happen to have any coat on," reminded Billy, "your advice don't count. Skinny, you keep your eye on th' other feller, to see that he don't try on any funny-work, and I'll see what I can do with this one. If he kills me, see that my grave is kept green. Now, Mr. Mexican, wade in."

Billy was not tall, but he was solid, and had a width of shoulder and girth of arm that might have surprised his opponent had they been bared.

The Mexican was much the larger of the two, and had the advantage of mature years, but it remained to be seen whether he had the quick movements the lad possessed, or knew anything about the "science" of the "manly art."

The Mexican strode forward with as much confidence as though he expected to give Billy a cuff on the ear and let that settle it. But, and to his surprise, no doubt, he could not get a hand anywhere near the boy's head. His arms were brushed aside as those of a child might have been.

"Cuss ye!" he grated, "I'll show yer whether I won't hit ye or not!" and as he spoke he drew back his right arm to send in a crusher.

He made the mistake the novice always makes in a set-to with one who is "up" in boxing. He met the same fate that had fallen to the lad so shortly before. At the same time that his right arm shot out, so did Billy's left, and as it came straight from the shoulder, Billy's fist got there first.

Billy's own blow moved his head out of the way of the Mexican's fist, while the momentum supplied by the other's stroke added all the force needed to earn him a fall.

Down the Mexican went, with considerable force, flat on his back.

"Whoop!" cried Skinny, "that's th' style! Oh! but mebby you fellers will find that you've made a mistake, after all! If you took us fer coyotes, you'll find that we're lions, every time."

"Time!" called Billy, laughing. "Get right up to th' scratch, Greaser, or I'll declare ye licked. Come, we want to be on our way as soon as we can, so don't keep th' court waitin', if you please. Come on— Oh, you are comin', eh?"

Yes, he was coming. He was coming with a bellow that expressed his rage and disappointment.

It was a case of *veni*—nothing more. The *vidi* *rici* part of it would have to be changed to tell the rest. He didn't see to any great extent, and he was conquered most beautifully.

Billy had hard work, for a few moments, to ward him off, but, presently, he got in a terrific blow, and over the fellow went, and there he

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lay. He had been knocked senseless, and the fight was over. The Mexican youth looked upon the fallen man, one of his eyes being still available, and wondered, no doubt, how it had happened.

CHAPTER VI.

DIRTY JACK AND BUCK BOWIE.

"You've salted him, too," observed Skinny — "salted and peppered him, both."

"It looks that way," agreed Billy. "What d'ye think about it, Barty?"

"I'll show ye next time," was the vicious retort. "I ain't done with ye yet. Luck was on your side this time."

"Sweet pertaters, that's where it allus is! Luck and yours truly are twin brothers to each other, and we pull together all th' time. When you hook your horns with Broadway Billy, you are just invitin' a tussle with luck, too."

"You can crow now, but you won't crow long. You may think you've done a smart thing, but there's nothin' smart about it. It was dumb luck, every bit. You couldn't ha-laid Antonio out if it wasn't. You can bet that he'll have it in fur you, too, so you want to get away from Texas while you've got whole bones."

"I see myself goin' now, don't you? I'm makin' such haste to get away that you could play checkers on my coat-tails, if you could keep up with me. I'm so frightened I can hardly stand. Don't you see my knees gimble under me? Sweet pertaters! you don't begin to know me yet, you black-and-tan Greaser. Jest run to th' house and tell Petala how grandly you've done me up."

Skinny still held his revolver ready for use, so that no treacherous shot could be fired, and Billy had vaulted into the saddle while talking.

"Come, Skinny," Billy now added; "we'll be off. We've monkeyed around here about long enough. Ta-ta, Barty, my prairie rattler; when you want to see me again on business, please call at the office."

With that the two New York lads touched their horses and were off across the grassy plain with the speed of the wind.

"That was th' neatest job you ever done," Skinny complimented.

"It was a mighty lucky one," Billy averred. "Bartolo will be wary of me now, you bet."

"Yes, but only worse luck, for th' both of 'em will be ready to stab ye in th' back when ye ain't lookin'. You'll have ter have yer eyes wide open all th' time, and be on th' watch for 'em."

"I'll try to do that, you bet, and with your help I guess we'll be able ter block their little game. Sweet pertaters! but that was a daisy drop you got on that big Greaser, Skinny. I'm proud of ye, my gay an' festive clothes-pin; and I mean what I say too."

"Oh, that was nothin'. I got th' chance that I was hopin' fer, and there I had him. Didn't he drop his shooter quick, though! I reckon he thought I would bore him afore he could wink, if he didn't."

"That was th' style. You looked shoot, all over."

"Well, I guess I did mean biz, then."

They rode on, talking all the way, and in due time arrived at the place where the great herd was once more peacefully grazing.

In the mean time Lariat Louie had reached there, and when the two lads arrived he was just making an investigation as to the cause of the stampede.

Two men were before his tribunal, accused, and these were Dirty Jack, the half-breed, and another fellow called Buck Bowie, a fellow of about the same stamp.

Dirty Jack was half Mexican and half Indian, as near as any one could tell, and his personal uncleanness had earned for him the sobriquet he bore. Buck Bowie was an American, perhaps, but not one of whom his country might feel proud.

Broadway Billy and Skinny drew rein in the rear of the assembled horsemen, just behind Lariat Louie.

"Well, you fellows, what have you got to say for yourselves?" Lariat Louie was asking.

"I say it's a 'fernal lie!" cried Dirty Jack, hotly.

"You call me a liar! I'll—"

"There, there, Will," Lariat Louie checked, "this is no time to take it up. I will attend to him."

One of the cowboys, Will Harris by name, but better known as "Waco Will," had whipped out a revolver, but he returned it to his belt when Louie spoke.

"Let him look out, then," he muttered.

"Well, it ain't so," Dirty Jack persisted, "an' I leave it to Buck if it is."

"In course it ain't," that worthy agreed.

"Have you any other proof to offer, besides your own word?" asked Lariat Louie.

The two fellows looked at each other, and it was clear that they hadn't. The case was against them, so far.

"No, I don't see's we have," answered Jack. "Yer see, Lariat Louie, we is sort o' looked down on by th' rest of th' boys, and none of 'em is our friends. That's about th' reason th' thing is laid to us, anyhow."

"I cannot believe that," Louie declared. "I don't believe there is a man among them mean enough to bear false witness against you, and I would stake my life on the honor of Waco Will."

"That's jest where it is; yer don't give our side of th' story no show, nohow. Ain't our word as good as theirs?"

"No, it is not, for you have lied to me before, and more than once. But, if you have any proof, let's hear what it is."

"Well, we ain't got none."

"Then this case goes against you. Waco Will and two good men declare that they saw you, both of you, slyly goading the cows, and that they shouted to you several times. You shouted back that you guessed you knew your business, and kept right on, pretending that the cows wanted to break out of the herd. Before long you had a score of the cows wild, and they broke away and the whole herd followed. And now I'll tell you something more. I was away down on the other side of the herd at the time, and you thought I did not see your work, but I saw enough of it to know that the story told is true. You are discharged, both of you, and you may get off your horses."

"Won't yer let us ride 'em to th' house?"

"I won't trust you out of range with them. Get right off, and if you want to get your pay, go to the house on foot."

The two rascals slid out of their saddles, and with muttered threats upon their lips slunk away in the direction of the ranch buildings.

"I'll bet a Mexican moon they don't show their faces at the ranch," observed Waco Will.

"Of course they won't," agreed Lariat Louie. "I'm sorry I didn't get rid of them before. This would have been avoided, if I had. They were here when I came, however, and I couldn't very well turn them away without good cause."

"And that's what you had this time, sure," one of the cowboys asserted. "This run has cost th' boss a big pile, I'll bet."

"You are right in saying that," agreed Lariat Louie. "Some of you must go back over the ground at once, now, and gather up the calves, if any are left alive. Before you go, however, let me introduce you to—" and he turned his horse suddenly and waved his hand toward Broadway Billy—"the Prince of the Cowboys!"

Billy turned red to the crown of his head.

"What has he done?" was the instant demand.

"What right has he to such a title as that?"

Lariat Louie told them, briefly but clearly, of Billy's part in the narrow escape of Vida Maxwell and her father, and a ringing cheer was given.

It was a cheer in hearty approval of the well-earned sobriquet.

Billy felt that he was called upon to say something, now, since every eye was upon him to see how he carried his new honors.

"I thank you, friends," he said, "but I'm afraid you've made a mistake. It would have been a heap more appropriate if you had called me Prince of Blockheads. That was all dumb luck, anyhow, and th' first thing you know I'll be doin' something that will make you wish you'd dubbed me King of Fools."

This raised a laugh all around.

"We will take the risk of that," assured Lariat Louie. "We have not wintered with you for nothing. We know you, my boy."

"You bet we do," cried all the rest.

Lariat Louie now appointed the men who were to go back over the trail to round up the calves and few stray cows, ordering them to kill all that were badly wounded.

These men set out upon their errand, and the cowboy chief stationed the others in their places around the herd.

Billy and Skinny remained with Louie for the present.

"It was lucky they didn't get over into Maxwell's herd again," observed Billy, as they still talked about the recent wild run.

"Right you are, there," agreed Louie. "I was afraid they would. I guess you and your pard had a good share in turning them. You took a risky ride."

"So we found out, afore we got clear of 'em. It was lucky they turned when they did. It

would have been all up with us if they hadn't. It would have been mighty bad fer Judge Maxwell and his daughter, too."

"Heavens, yes! Her escape was narrow enough, as it was. I must thank you in earnest, Billy, for that service. Perhaps you don't understand, but I can thank you none the less."

"I reckon I understand hard enough," Billy made answer, "for I have been there myself," and he winked one eye knowingly.

"You have hit it," Lariat Louie admitted. "Your case, I take it, is with that little black-eyed beauty at the house, Petala Vickers, eh?"

"A fellow might go further and fare worse," Billy parried.

"Then it is so, that you're stuck on her?"

"You've got some reason fer askin' that," Billy asserted, quickly. "It ain't your style."

"Yes, I have. I was going to warn you that Waco Will has his cap set in that direction. He's a noble fellow, but hot-headed."

"He needn't worry himself on my account," and Billy laughed. "My case is further away by a good many hundred miles. You 'member Polly Osmond, don't you, Skinny?" turning to him.

"You bet," was the response. "She was th' girl that turned out ter be th' rich man's daughter, Meta Elmore. Yes, I 'member her."

"Well that's where my case rests. I ruther like Petala, I own, but she can't jump Meta's claim, and that I'm tellin' ye."

"Well, I'm glad of it," declared Louie, "for I wouldn't want to see trouble between you and Waco Will. I'll set him right, if you don't care."

"I'll do it myself, soon's I see him," said Billy. "Will and me's too good friends to have th' shadder of a purty face come between us. He's got another rival, however, and one that means biz, too. He wants to look out fer him."

Skinny laughed, while Lariat Louie demanded:

"Who is that one?"

"Bartolo Tabano. He's on th' war-path, with blood in his eye."

Some questions on the part of Louie, then brought out the adventure Billy and Skinny had had, and the three enjoyed a hearty laugh over it all. Lariat Louie enjoyed it immensely, but he warned the lads that they must look out for treachery from their enemies at any time. But that needed no impressing on their minds. They had arrived at the same conclusion themselves.

CHAPTER VII.

THE LOVERS' MEETING.

It was in the afternoon when Judge Maxwell, Vida and Humbert Voorbees took their leave of the Millwall Mansion.

Humbert Voorbees had been trying to get a chance to talk with Vida, but she had avoided him as persistently as possible. He had not found the opportunity he desired.

When the trio set out for home, however, that is, for the home of the Maxwells, then Voorbees took advantage of the chance and brought the conversation about to suit himself, caring nothing for the presence of the judge.

"Well," he asked, presently, "how does my case come on?"

"Did you address me?" asked Vida.

He was looking right at her, so there was no need to ask.

"To be sure," he responded, pleasantly.

"To what case do you refer?" she inquired.

"How perverse you can be, when you try," Voorbees exclaimed. "You know well enough that I refer to my offer of marriage. What are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"No, sir."

"But, I wanted my answer soon. When will you know?"

"I don't know that, either."

"Oh! you are provoking. Can't you help me, Mr. Maxwell?" appealing to the father.

"I have been trying to help you, right along," was the response. "I think the answer will be all satisfactory when it does come."

"Well, I hope so, anyhow. But, Vida, how much longer are you going to keep me waiting?"

"I don't know that, either."

"Pest on it! but you are enough to provoke a fellow to anger! Won't you say when you will give me my decided answer?"

"How much time will you give papa on that debt?" Vida coolly asked.

"What has that got to do with it?"

"Why, everything, of course. It is on the strength of that that you are pressing so determinedly."

"Well, I will give you till the last day of the month, and no longer."

"Very well, then; on the last day of the month, and at the last hour, I will give you your answer."

"And you will keep me waiting so long?"

"The time is only too short to me."

"Well, well, have it your own way. You hear, judge; she promises that she will give me her answer on the last day of the month."

"Yes, I hear," was the return, "but I don't see why she might not as well give it now as to put it off—"

"Exactly!" cried Voorbees, eagerly. "The short delay can make no difference in the situation, and—"

"You have heard what I will do," Vida broke in, "so do not harp on the matter any longer, pray."

"Well, let it rest till then," the lover agreed.

Vida touched her horse with the whip she carried, and took herself out of their company, leaving them behind.

"She's full of spirit, I declare," mused Voorbees, as he looked after her admiringly.

"You'll find out so, if you make her marry you against her will," the judge returned. "I'd rather not be in your place. She'd be a dove if she loved you, but she don't, and I won't venture to say what you'll find her."

Voorbees smiled a devilish grin.

"She'll be a dove anyhow," he averred. "I'll tame her, if she goes to cutting up any tricks with me. But, she'll know better than that."

"Then you still insist upon having her?"

"Most certainly I do. I am determined to have her."

"And you won't give me any longer time on that mortgage, in her favor?"

"Not an hour longer. That's my winning card, you see. Your daughter shall become my wife, and at the time she has named, or away goes your ranch and you'll be a beggar."

Judge Maxwell groaned.

"If I only had a few hundreds," he thought, "to try my luck, I might win enough to clear myself. But, how am I to get it? I haven't a thing I can sell, now, with this mortgage hanging over me."

They rode on in part silence, and reached the ranch, finally, some time after Vida had arrived there.

The young lady had gone to her room, and would not make her appearance again until after Humbert Voorbees had taken his leave.

When she came down from her room she found her father alone in his reading-room, and going in softly she laid her arm over his shoulders and bent over him.

He looked up, and she saw that his eyes were red.

"What is the matter, papa?" she asked.

"You have no need to ask," he responded, sadly.

"Is it the prospect of losing your ranch that makes you sad? or is it the sacrifice that you are demanding of me?"

"It is both," was the answer. "I hate to force this thing upon you, Vida, but there is no other way that I can see. As to its being a sacrifice, though, that is only in your imagination. Any other girl in Texas would jump at such a chance."

Vida sighed wearily.

"You cannot understand," she murmured. "But, let us say no more about that. If you have the money, when the time is up, he will have to take it, will he not?"

"Of course he will. But there is no use looking for anything like that. How can I get hold of the money?"

"I don't know. If not, why not let him take the ranch, and you and I go away and—"

"What! give up the ranch to him?"

"Certainly. You hold it very lightly anyhow, since you risk it on the turn of a card. Suppose I save it to you by marrying him, how long would it be before you would have another mortgage on it?"

That did not have the desired effect. Instead, it roused the judge up to hot anger.

"Zounds!" he cried, springing up, "but no child of mine shall talk to me like this. You shall marry Humbert Voorbees! Do you understand? You shall marry him? Go, now, and make up your mind to it."

He pointed to the door, and without a further word Vida went from the room.

Judge Maxwell paced the floor in no gentle mood. His daughter had angered him, and now he meant to force her to do his will.

"I'll teach her her place," he grated. "I'll show that I am her father, and that I am to be obeyed. Have her mind set upon a low-born

cowboy, will she! I'll make her marry a gentleman whether she will or not. I was inclined to give in to her whim, if I could get the money to stave Voorbees off with, but now I'll assert myself."

Before the judge was aware of it, the shadows of evening began to creep into the room, to find him still walking to and fro.

He had been deeply buried in thought, and just as he roused up there came a rap at the door.

"Come in," the judge invited, and a man in cowboy attire entered.

It was Chico Sam, Maxwell's foreman.

"Oh, it's you Sam, eh?" the judge greeted.

"It ain't nobody else," the man responded, as he closed the door after him. "I didn't see ye out around, so thought I'd come in."

"That's right. Well, what is the word?"

"That stampede over at Millwall's didn't work as we wanted to, but it had made a big loss, I'm told."

"No, it didn't work as we wanted it to, you're right. Millwall won't hear a word against his foreman. No use trying to oust him that way. But, how did you find out about it?"

"Why, Dick Jack and Buck Bowie have been bounced, and they came right over here. They done their part all right, but that sharp-eyed Waco Will got onto their game, and they got it."

"Whew! that's bad. They didn't let out anything, did they?"

"No, they say not. They came right here, and I paid 'em, as you said."

"That was right. Where are they?"

"Out with the boys. I have put 'em to work."

"All right. Tell them to keep quiet, though, so Millwall won't learn where they are."

"I've done all that. I guess they are all right. It won't be no use tryin' anything further, I opine."

"No, we mustn't venture any further. I hoped Lariat Louie would be discharged, but it did not work that way. But, Voorbees is going to try his hand, he says, and we'll see what he can do."

"I don't reckon he'll do much, fer Lariat Louie is hand in glove with Millwall, and it won't be easy ter displace him. As fer that Waco Will, though, cuss him! I mean ter 'tend to his case!"

Their talk ran on, and while they were in conversation night settled down over the quiet plains.

When it was getting dark, Vida Maxwell had slipped quietly out of the house, and going to the stable where her horse was kept, had saddled it and led it out, and mounting, rode away toward the southwest.

She was at home in the saddle, and had no thought of fear. She had on a belt, and a revolver in it was ready to her hand.

Riding straight on at a gentle canter, she did not pause once till she came near to a motte of cottonwoods.

Then she drew rein and put a whistle to her lips, giving two short, sharp signals with it.

She listened, and her signal was answered in like manner from the motte. In a moment more a horseman dashed forward to meet her.

When he came up they grasped hands warmly, and each exclaimed the other's name.

"Vida!"

"Louie!"

"I see you understand my signal," Vida observed.

"You might be sure of that," was the response. "And you see I am on hand. You had a narrow escape this forenoon."

"Yes, but thanks to that brave boy I came out unharmed. What a noble fellow he is! But, I am here to talk business with you, Louie, and must make my stay as short as I can. I would not have it known that I have come here to meet you. I might not be allowed another chance, and it might work harm to you."

CHAPTER VIII.

A BRUSH WITH CAPTAIN UNKNOWN.

THERE was a pause, and both listened attentively.

They fancied they had heard something; but the sound, if there had been any, was not repeated.

"It may have been nothing," observed Vida, "but let us move slowly toward my home while we talk."

"As you please," and they started their horses forward at a walk. "And now tell me, how could this meeting work harm to me, as you have hinted?"

"It would win you the enmity of Humbert Voorbees, and no knowing what he might do."

He would not let anything stand in his way, in his determination to win my hand, and least of all a rival."

Lariat Louie laughed lightly.

"I fancy I have his enmity already," he returned. "I am not afraid of him. As you are aware, I am only too eager to let him know that I am his rival. Will you not let it be known, Vida?"

"Not now, oh, not now! When I gave you that signal this afternoon, Louie, my heart was heavy, and I had unwelcome news for you. Now, though, it is changed, and I am ready to give you the best of news. But, you must be patient, and help me with my plans, or I may fail."

"The best of news, you say!" Lariat Louie cried. "Do you know what you are saying, Vida? The best of news would be your promise to marry me."

"And I promise. I will be your wife, Louie!"

The horses stopped, as though understanding the importance of the moment, the lovers embraced, and the stillness was broken by something that sounded suspiciously like kiss upon kiss; then they were riding on.

"I am the happiest mortal in all Texas!" Lariat Louie exclaimed, in low but fervent tone. "But, tell me what has happened? How is it that you give me the promise now, when you have been refusing all along?"

"I will tell you all about it. You know I had been hoping that papa would grow friendly toward you, so that you could ask him for my hand in the good old way, but that did not seem likely to occur. Instead, being in the power of Voorbees, he has been urging me to marry him. This afternoon I promised to give him a decided answer on the last day of this month. I was yet undecided whether to make the sacrifice or not. But, now I am determined."

"And have you told them so?"

"No, not yet. It must be kept till the very last moment, for I have hopes that the money can be had to raise the mortgage and so set papa free. If not, then I shall refuse and come to you, and the ranch must go."

"Bless you!" Lariat Louie cried. "You need not fear to trust me. If the worst comes, your father shall not want. This country is broad and wide, and plenty of room for another ranch somewhere, my love."

The rest of their talk need not be set forth. It was of too confidential a nature, anyhow, to be rudely delivered over to cold type.

Lariat Louie accompanied his promised bride to within a quarter of a mile of her home, where they parted, and he galloped back toward the Millwall Ranch, his heart beating high with its new-found happiness.

Vida reached the house in safety, and in explanation as to where she had been, said that she had simply been out for a little gallop.

In the mean time, barely had Lariat Louie and his sweetheart departed from the border of the motte, than a horseman rode out of the timber.

The night was not very dark, and he was to be seen as soon as he emerged from the deeper shadows, and it proved to be Buck Bowie, one of the men recently discharged from the Millwall Ranch.

"That's ther way ther wind blows, is it?" he said to himself, as he rode forth. "Wonder what old Maxwell would say if he knowed his gal was up to sich games? She's gone on Lariat Louie, and no mistake about that."

The rascal chuckled to himself, as he thought of the scene he might create by running over and telling the judge what he had discovered.

Presently the sound of hoofs broke upon his ears, and, in a little time, another horseman came up from the west.

As soon as he came in sight of Buck Bowie, he halted, and uttered the demand:

"Who are you, there?"

"It's me—Buck Bowie," was the response.

"Are you alone?"

"Yes, alone."

The other rider came forward, and it could be seen that he was masked.

"Good-evenin', Captain Unknown," Buck greeted, holding out his hand.

"Same to you, Buck," was the response, and the two shook hands. "I find you here, as agreed."

"Yes, I'm here, you bet. You kem close to runnin' inter a little snag, though, I'm tellin' ye?"

"A snag? How was that—what do you mean?"

"Why, Lariat Louie left here not more'n five minutes ago."

"Lariat Louie! What was he doing here?"
"He kem up after I'd been here awhile, and I was on th' p'nt of hailin' him fer you, when I caught on to who it was and got back out o' sight. He waited quite a time, an' then who should ride up but a gal, and what gal d'ye think it was but that leetle beauty of Judge Maxwell's."

"The deuce it was!"

"That's who it was, and only fer my boss steppin' on a dry stick I might ha' witnessed their love-makin'. As it was, they got skart away, and went off at a walk in th' direction of Maxwell's."

"You are sure you made no mistake about them?"

"Oh, there was little chance fer a mistake. It was short range, and plenty light enough ter see who they was."

The masked man muttered something that sounded like a curse, but his words were not loud enough to be understood.

"Where is Dirty Jack?" he demanded.

"Over at Maxwell's. We're there, now, as I hadn't told ye. We got fired this mornin', after a stampede of th' Millwall herd. They put th' blame onto me and Jack, and we had ter lift stakes and travel."

"I suppose they had the dead-wood on you, too, but that don't matter. No doubt you are no friend to Lariat Louie, now."

"You kin bet your head on that, captain."

"I thought so. Why didn't you pop him over when you had a chance?"

"Well, I wanted ter see who he was waitin' fer; and then I knowed that there was jest th' ghost of a chance fer me to be mistaken in him. I was half a mind ter do it fer him, though, and that's th' fact."

"Drop him, next time you get a bead on him, and I'll give you a hundred dollars for doing it. He is in the way of the Red River Raiders, or he will be if he once takes to th' trail. They'll be after us, after our next raid, you bet."

"And was that what you wanted to see me about?"

"Partly, yes. But I wanted to post you about our next raid. We are going for Millwall again, and we want to run off a hundred cows, if we can. It will not be easy, though, now that you and Jack are not with him."

"It kin be done, though. Jack and me kin git inter th' herd, and work that many cows away, I guess. But, there'll be music in th' air, you kin count on that, sure. He's got th' best lot o' cowboys within a hundred miles, and if they git after ye, they'll make ye sweat, sure pop."

"They mustn't get after us, that's th' beauty of our raids. The cattle must go on a walk, and by daylight must be away out of reach. In case of discovery— But, there is no need to go over this. You know all about it. The Indians are too sly to be found asleep."

"And when is this raid to take place? What time of th' night, too, be ye goin' ter make yer swoop?"

"On th' night of the last day of the month. I may not be on hand myself, but if not, Dog's Tail will lead you."

"I hate ter be led by a Injun, but if them's orders, why of course—"

"And it is. If I am not on hand, then Dog's Tail has charge."

They talked on for a considerable time, laying their plans for their piece of rascally outlawry.

Finally, they parted company, Buck Bowie setting out in the direction of the Maxwell Ranch, and Captain Unknown going north, taking a course midway between the buildings of the two places, where he was not likely to encounter any one.

Lariat Louie was riding along, busy with his happy thoughts, and paying but little attention to his surroundings.

He was half-way home, about, when suddenly a horseman loomed up in the darkness, right ahead, but a little to the left.

He was coming at right angles, and they were destined to meet if both kept on.

Lariat Louie checked his horse, and demanded:

"Who are you, stranger?"

It was no other than the chief of the Red River Raiders, Captain Unknown!

"Who are you yourself?" was the counter-demand, as he, too, drew rein.

"I am Lariat Louie, cowboy," admitted Louie, fearlessly.

They were within fifty yards of each other, near enough to see horse and man plainly, but too far away to distinguish features, and Louie did not see that the stranger was masked.

"Well, I'm a stranger," the outlaw declared, "and I'm headed fer Red River. If you don't keer, I'll ride on."

"Go ahead," Lariat Louie directed, cheerfully, "and good-night and a pleasant ride to you."

"Same to you," was the response, and the stranger touche*i* his horse and shot forward, crossing ahead of Louie and plunging into the darkness beyond.

A second later, however, there came a flash in the dark; the bark of a revolver followed, and a bullet sped by within a foot of Lariat Louie's head. The shot had come from the horseman.

The cowboy was surprised, and for a moment took no action, but, a second shot from the same direction aroused him, and whipping out his revolvers, he spurred forward in pursuit, firing as he did so with both hands.

A defiant laugh came back to him, and bullet after bullet whistled unpleasantly near, but he was returning them with interest, and regardless of the danger, urged his horse on.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the outlaw, "you can't do it, Lariat Louie! You can't overtake the horse of Captain Unknown!"

"It is the chief of the Red River Raiders!" Lariat Louie muttered. "I will have him, dead or alive!"

At that moment, though, a bullet hit his horse, and the noble animal stumbled, staggered forward a little distance, and then fell, mortally hurt.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PARDS ON DISPATCH DUTY.

LARIAT LOUIE was wild.

The lost horse had been a great favorite.

"You'll pay for this, curse you!" he called out after the outlaw.

"Ha, ha, ha!" came back the taunting laugh, "worse luck to *you* next time; and the hoof-falls of the outlaw's horse died away in the distance.

Louie examined his horse, to make sure that it was dead, and finding it so, removed the saddle and bridle, and with them over his shoulder, set out to do the remainder of the distance on foot.

"I wish I could have known who it was at sight," he complained to himself, "he would not have got away as he did, if I could have helped it. He meant to kill me, that is plain enough, and I will have it in for him if we come face to face again. He is carrying things with too high a hand here."

Presently he heard the hoof strokes of horses.

He stopped to listen, and found that they were coming toward him.

They were coming from the direction of the Millwall Ranch buildings, and he decided that there were two of them.

Not knowing who they were, and his revolvers being empty, he had no desire to encounter them, so he dropped the saddle and sat down on it to wait till they had passed before going further.

The horses came on, and as luck would have it, came straight toward the place where he was seated.

In a few moments they loomed up in the darkness, and Lariat Louie saw that he must get out of the way or be run over. And it was too late now to get out of the way without being seen.

Springing suddenly up, he drew one of his useless revolvers, and cried:

"Whoa! Hold up here, partners!"

The horses were jerked to a stop at once, and a cheery voice exclaimed:

"Sweet pertaters! You'd orter know better than ter stop a feller like that, an' scare him out of half a year's growth. You've made my heart stop beatin', and hang my sister Sal's sick cat if I know whether it will set a-goin' again or not. Really, it is too much for my nervs. What's bu'sted, anyhow?"

Lariat Louie would have liked to pretend that he was a robber, but did not dare try it. He knew Billy too well, and feared the result.

"Why, is that you, Billy?" he demanded, putting up his weapon and stepping forward. "I'm Lariat Louie."

"That's who it is," Billy assured. "But where's your hoss? What are you doin' on foot?"

"My horse is dead," Louie gloomily informed. "I have had a brush with Captain Unknown, the chief of the outlaw band, and got the worst of it."

"Sweet pertaters! I knowed there was a p'izen diffikility of some sort goin' on out here. Me and Skinny seen th' flashes and heard th' shots, and we thought we'd run out and see what was goin' on."

"Didn't you know that you might be running into danger?"

"Oh, that's an old story with us. We knowed that you was out somewhere, and thought you might be in trouble of some sort."

"And suppose I had been the outlaw, and had made it warm for you, how then?"

"Sweet pertaters! I had a shoo'er p'nted at ye almost as soon as ye jumped up. I reckon I'd 'a' let drive, if it was necessary."

"Just what I thought might be the case, so I didn't waste any time about letting you know who it was. But, what were you doing out? Where were you heading for, anywhere in particular?"

"We was havin' a race," answered Skinny.

"Another race! Haven't you settled that question yet?"

"Yes, another race," assured Billy. "You see this skeleton of a partner of mine will insist that his hoss-kin outrun mine, and I say it can't, and so we tried ter settle it one way or t'other."

"Well, which beat?"

"Sweet pertaters! it was nip and tuck. I couldn't git away from him, nohow, and he couldn't git ahead an inch ter save his buttons. It looked like my shadder comin' on aside me, only that my shadder would have been more visible, if th' moon had been out and shinin'."

"Then, it looks as though your horses are about evenly matched, so you may as well look at it that way," observed Louie.

"But, it wasn't no fair test," Billy complained. "Here my hoss had a load ter carry, while his had next to nothin'. But, he won't race fair. I want him ter swing a couple o' anvils across his hoss fer ballast, but he won't do that."

Lariat Louie laughed, and said:

"Well, turn and we'll go on to the house. This has been a dear night's work for me."

"Won't you ride?" asked Billy.

"Oh, no, I can get along all right on Shanks' mare."

"I was goin' to suggest that you could mount Skinny's hoss," added Billy, "and put Skinny in your pocket, or use him fer a whip, jest as you please."

"Oh, you let up," cried Skinny. "If I was as light in th' body as you are in th' head, then you might have somethin' ter talk about. Thank goodness there is somethin' of me, if it isn't much."

"Somethin' of ye!" cried Billy, twisting the word to suit the moment. "I should say there is! You are altogether thin, my gay and festive pippin; not only some thin, but a good deal thin. If it wasn't fer your clothes we couldn't see ye at all. If ye was ter pull up another hole in yer belt, it would cut ye in two."

"Oh, give me a rest, will ye."

"Rest all ye want to, partner. Fat folks allus requires a good deal o' rest. Take all ye kin git."

Lariat Louie had picked up his saddle again, and they started forward in a walk toward the ranch buildings.

Louie told all about his adventure, on the way, and he and Skinny fully agreed with Broadway Billy that Captain Unknown and his band ought to be run to earth.

"Sweet pertaters!" Billy cried, "but I'd like ter have th' honor of landin' him in jail, but I don't reckon I will. I'm too tender about th' feet yet to tackle such a job as that. We'll pass that over ter you, Louie."

"It will be no child's play, whoever undertakes it," Louie observed. "Only a general man-hunt will wind up his career, I imagine."

Some days passed.

Nothing especially exciting occurred.

Billy and Skinny had mentioned going away, to Paul Millwall, but the cattle-king and his young bride would not listen to such a proposition. Both insisted that the lads should make out the half-year with them, at the least, and so strong was their urging that Billy and Skinny finally agreed.

One morning Erica Millwall came to Billy with a request.

"Do you think you can do an important favor for me?" she asked him.

"If it is anything that I am able to do, you needn't ask if I will," was the lad's response.

"I want you to ride to Bowie and carry an important communication to Lawyer Higgs-worth of that place. Mr. Millwall cannot go, and says he cannot spare Lariat Louie to-day, and thought you and Skinny would like no better fun."

"Sweet pertaters!" cried Billy, "but he hit th' nail right on th' head, kerslap, that time."

We're jest th' goslings that will undertake it, you bet. We'll be ready in ten minutes, or as soon as I can find that lanky ghost of a pard of mine. We'll ride to th' house soon's we're ready."

"All right, and you are to take your time, you understand. You will get there late in the afternoon, and can leave there early in the morning to return home. As you have been there before, you will not miss the way."

"Oh, don't worry about our not findin' th' way. That slim partner of mine kin find his way anywhere. He got inter a gas-pipe in a hotel once, and wandered about in it fer two weeks, but he found his way out at last. Oh, he is a— But, there he comes, now, I b'lieve, or is it a shadder on th' fence? No, that's him."

"On! oh! You frightful fibber!" Mrs. Millwall exclaimed. "I would not begin to count the stories you have told me about that poor boy. But, get your horses and make ready, and I'll tell you the errand when you come to the house."

The lady turned back to the house, and Billy ran to meet Skinny to tell him of their important errand.

"Sweet pertaters!" he cried, "but we are in fer it, Skinny, sure pop!"

"In fer what?" Skinny demanded.

"A boss horseback ride," was the response. "We're goin' over to Bowie, and goin' alone, too."

"Git out," the slim partner cried, "you're jokin'."

"Am I? You jest hustle your bony frame and git out your hoss, and you'll see that th' joke is all on our side."

Skinny saw that Billy meant it, so he followed him and in a little time they had got their horses out and made ready for the journey.

When they rode to the house they found Mr. and Mrs. Millwall waiting for them on the piazza.

"You are soon ready," Mr. Millwall greeted.

"We know how to hustle, when occasion requires," responded Billy.

"I am sorry to send you on this errand," Paul said, "but under the circumstances it will be a great favor if you will go."

"Go!" exclaimed Billy, "we're only too glad ter go. Jest give us th' p'inter as to what ye want us ter do, and we'll be off sooner than quick."

"You see," the cattle-king explained, "I can't go myself, and can't send Louie or Waco Will, to-day, and they are about the only ones we would trust with the business. And in point of fact we think better of you for the errand than either of them."

"I'll put salt on that," observed Billy. "But, as you want us to go, we'll do th' business up brown or bu'st a buckle; hey, Skinny?"

"That's what we will," the thin partner agreed.

"Oh, I know you will do it all right," waived Paul. "You see, the errand is simply this: You are to go to Bowie, and to the office of Lawyer Hiram Higgsworth. We do not care to commit our communication to paper, so you will carry it in your mind. We want Higgsworth to come to our place day after to-morrow, sure, prepared to transfer the mortgage on the Maxwell estate from Humbert Voorbees to Mrs. Millwall. Do you understand?"

"You bet."

"That is the thing in a nutshell. The important part of it is, to caution Mr. Higgsworth to let nothing of it reach the ears of Voorbees, and to make him promise that he will not fail us."

"Kerreck. I'll put that inter his think-box, if I have ter drill it in. You can depend on us, every time. We'll ride inter Bowie with a flourish o' trumps, and you will see us back again all in good season."

Millwall saw that the lads were well provided with food, and everything necessary for the journey, and they set out in high spirits.

CHAPTER X.

THE FEVER OF OLD ATTACKS BILLY.

It was a ride of seventy miles.

In the East, that is quite a long distance, but in the West it is not considered so very far.

We have only to glance at a map of Texas, and apply its scale, to see how really insignificant a distance of seventy miles is there.

The lads had no trouble in finding the way, for the trail was plain and they had been over it before, and at a late hour in the afternoon they rode into the town somewhat tired.

Billy's first care was for their horses, and he sought out a public house and had them stabled and properly cared for.

Then, after a little brushing up, he and Skinny

set out to find the lawyer and deliver the message.

A little inquiry brought them to his office, and the lads went boldly in.

Hiram Higgsworth was a man of forty-five, lean and wiry, and with a pate as bald as a door-knob.

He was in his office, his feet upon his desk and the rest of him buried out of sight in the folds of a newspaper he was reading.

When the door opened and the boys' boots sounded on the floor, the feet disappeared from the table and the lawyer popped up over the newspaper like a jack-in-the-box.

Billy doffed his sombrero, and asked:

"Are you th' boss of this coop, sir?"

"I am the proprietor of this office, if you mean that," was the response.

"That's what I meant," Billy assured. "You are Mr. Hiram Higgsworth, then, I take it."

"That is my name, young man. But, what can I do for you? Do you want to see me on business? If so, a fee in—"

"Sweet pertaters! don't begin to talk money afore I get my hind leg over th' sill!" Billy exclaimed. "I didn't bring my boodle along, anyhow, fer I knowed it would be risky. Fact is, I'm here as a messenger."

"Oh, you're a messenger, eh? Who sent you, if I may ask?"

"Mr. Paul Millwall, the cattle-king, if ye know him."

"I know him, certainly," the lawyer cried, showing interest at once. "What is the pleasure of Mr. Millwall? I shall be only too glad to serve him. Be seated, young gentlemen, be seated, I beg."

The lawyer could afford to be polite, now, with a hope of the patronage of the rich young cattle-king in view.

"Thank ye, but I guess we can stand," responded Billy, "since our own beauty didn't proclaim our royal blood and win us th' invitation on our own merits. But, we'll let that pass. Mr. Millwall wants you to come to his place day after to-morrow, sure, and come prepared to transfer the mortgage on the Maxwell estate from Humbert Voorbees to Mrs. Millwall. Do you grip onto th' drift of that?"

"I understand, young man, I understand. I will not fail to be there."

"Good enough. Now, here's th' second chapter: You must not, by any manner of means, let anything of this be known to Voorbees. This is th' important part of it all. If you do, then th' jig is up, I take it, and your fee will be up in a balloon, sure pop. Do you nail that, too?"

"I understand perfectly well, sir. It shall be done just as desired. I will keep the matter still, and will be on hand."

"That takes it off my hands, then," Billy remarked. "By th' way," he added, "is your eyesight good, Mr. Higgsworth?"

"Is my eyesight good?" the lawyer repeated, in some surprise. "Yes, I can say that it is pretty good, young man; but why do you ask that?"

"I want to call your attention to my invisible partner, here," Billy explained. "He's not quite invisible, though, if you look sharp. Do ye see him?"

"Why, of course I see him," the amazed lawyer assured.

"There's nothin' th' matter with your sight then. But, what I was comin' at is, that Skinny here is my witness that I have done my part of this business right up in shape, and now if there's anything goes wrong it will rest with you. Do you savvy?"

The lawyer had to smile in spite of himself, while Skinny blushed, as usual.

"You need have no fears of anything going wrong," the lawyer assured. "You can tell Mr. Millwall that I will be on hand if I am alive."

"Good enough. And now that th' business is off my hands, I'll be goin'."

"When are you going back?" the lawyer asked.

"To-morrow mornin', if nothin' bu'sts."

"Very well; just stop in, then, and I'll send a letter with you to Mr. Millwall that will satisfy him that you have performed your errand all right."

"Say, jest hold yer hosses right there," said Billy, turning back for a moment. "Mr. Millwall, wouldn't send nothing in writing to you, and I don't reckon he wants you to send anything in writing to him. If you're goin' ter put anything of this business on paper, you are takin' a poor way ter keep it secret, that's all. If yer letter is about anything else, that alters th' case."

Mr. Higgsworth could only look at Billy in surprise. There was more "bottom" in the lad than he had looked for.

"There is good advice in what you say," he admitted, "and I'll put nothing on paper. No doubt Mr. Millwall has his reasons for wanting it kept close."

"That is th' most natural thing in th' world ter suppose," agreed Billy. "And now I'm goin' ter say somethin' on my own account," he added.

"Very well, what is it?"

"I have an idee that Mr. Millwall wouldn't want it ter reach th' ears of Judge Maxwell, either, though he didn't say anything about that."

"It shall not come to his knowledge. You have impressed me with the importance of the thing, young man, and it shall not be made known to any one."

"There, now you've hit it right on th' head," declared Billy. "That takes in th' hull field. There's nothin' more ter be said, and so now we'll slope. Come, Skinny, get your bones in motion. Good-day, Mr. Higgsworth."

"Good-day, lads," was the response, "and a safe return to you."

Billy and his slender pard went out, leaving the lawyer to himself and his thoughts upon the matter.

"How was that done, Skinny?" Billy asked, as they turned up the street.

"It would ha' been all right," the thin partner answered, "if you had kept yer head shut about me. I can't help bein' thin, can I?"

"I beg yer pardon, awful much, Skinny," said Billy in an earnest tone. "I hope you will live to git over it, though. Ye see I wanted ter impress it upon that old fellow, and that was th' first thing that popped into my head to say."

"Well, I wish you would let up on it, that's all. Anybody would think I am a walkin' hairpin, to hear you talk."

"Don't cry about it, anyhow, pard. You can't help bein' thin, of course. But, you are pickin' up, I think, slowly. I'll bet you will tip th' beam a whole ounce heavier than you did last fall. You are on th' gain, and mebby when we get back to New York you'll be big enough ter run for alderman. But then we'd have to change your name to Fatty, and how woud that strike you? They wouldn't know ye at Headquarters, and Inspector Br— Hello! if that ain't Judge Maxwell I'm a coyote!"

"Judge Maxwell!" exclaimed Skinny; "where?"

"Why, right ahead there, on th' other side." Skinny looked in the direction indicated.

"Great ginger!" he exclaimed, "but you're right. That's nothin' ter us, though, is it? He's got a right ter be here if he wants to, I reckon."

"Why, of course he has; but it hit me as queer that we should run across him, that's all."

"Wonder where he's goin'?"

"Give it up, but we'll keep our eye on him and see."

"Is th' detective fever croppin' out on ye?" Skinny demanded. "If it is, I'll lasso ye and lead ye back to th' ranch, that's all."

Billy laughed.

"No, I don't reckon there's much danger of it," he made answer. "It would liven things up, though, if we could git into somethin' of that sort, partner. I begin to feel rusty as a detective, and if— Hello! Goshen on wheels!"

"What in all wonders is th' matter with ye now?"

"There comes Dude Voorbees!"

"Where is he?"

"Straight ahead, this side."

"Sure enough."

Just at that moment Voorbees caught sight of Judge Maxwell, and started to go across to greet him.

The two lads watched them, saw them shake hands, and then Voorbees went with the judge up the street, finally both entering the hotel where the lads had stopped.

"There they are, sure," observed Billy, "and a little bird seems ter tell me that it will be jest as well fer us ter keep out o' sight. What d'ye say, my gay an' festive kangaroo?"

"Just as you say about it," said Skinny, in reply:

"Experience has shown me that when I git a 'pression o' that kind, that I had better pay heed to it. Hence and so forth, accordingly, we'll remain in th' dark as it were, for th' present, and see what comes of it."

"You don't think there's anything ter be found out, do you?"

"Can't most allus sometimes tell. Somethin' may crop out of it that wil be interestin'."

The lads had stopped, while talking, and while

they stood there, with their eyes toward the hotel, they saw Dirty Jack and the Mexican, Antonio, come down the street and go in.

"Sweet pertaters! there's a p'izen diffikilty brewin' now, Skinny, as sure as you're kickin', if these fellers has anything ter do with th' judge and Voorbees. Hang me if I don't sort o' feel th' fever breakin' out, my slender pippin', and that's a fack. Wish we could jump inter a disguise o' some sort."

"We'd better be jumpin' inter th' saddle and strikin' fer th' ranch. You'll go ter monke, in' around, pokin' your nose where you hadn't orter, and th' first thing you know we'll be into trouble of some sort."

"Jest as like as not, Skinny, my skeleton, but I can't help it no more'n I kin help eatin' when I'm hungry. Hello! there comes th' two p'izen critters out again."

He referred to Dirty Jack and Antonio.

They came out of the hotel and turned down the street, and Billy drew back out of sight behind the corner of a building as he spoke, Skinny with him.

"I'm goin' ter foller them, Skinny," Billy declared, "and see what it comes to. But we've got ter have a disguise, and what is it ter be? Wish I had brain in my think-box instead of water, mebby I'd be some good. Ha! I have it!"

"Ye have what?"

"Th' idee. We'll be niggers fer th' time bein'. We'll buy a box of boot-black and go inter temp'rary mournin'. Come, they've gone past, and we'll dodge into that corner store over thare. Oh, we'll get there yet, Eli, you bet!"

CHAPTER XI.

DARK SHADOWS LOOM UP.

THE two men having gone by, the lads emerged from their place of temporary hiding, and a moment later crossed the street.

They were about to enter the store, when Billy stopped suddenly with his usual exclamation.

"Sweet pertaters!" he burst out "this won't do, partner; where's yer brains? If you are th' brains of our combination, you want ter keep in workin' order."

"What's th' matter with ye now?" Skinny demanded.

"Why, who is goin' ter watch to see where th' fellers goes to, if we let 'em get out o' sight? We are gettin' rusty as detectives, sure's you're born."

"That's so, and I didn't once think of it. Let's hole 'em, and then see about th' disguise."

"That's th' idee, exactly. Come right along."

Having straightened themselves on the point, the two lads set out to follow the men, being a safe distance behind.

Dirty Jack and Antonio, the Mexican, were talking earnestly about something, and paid no attention to anything. They kept straight on for some distance, finally entering a rather low-looking saloon.

"There they go," observed Billy, "and now they are safe fer a little while."

"And here's another store, right at hand," added Skinny.

"So there is. Come, slender one, and we'll polish up."

Billy led the way and they entered the store, which was one of the general supply kind.

The proprietor of the place came forward, and Billy inquired:

"D'y'e keep blackin', boss?"

"What kind o' blackin' d'y'e mean?"

"Boot blackin', and the best you've got, too."

A box was handed out, and when Billy had paid for it, he asked:

"Now, sir, will you allow me to use it here?"

"Why, of course," was the response. "You'll find a brush—"

"Never mind a brush," Billy interrupted, "a rag will do better. You see, I have got a shadder of a pard here, and I want ter black him up so's I kin see him. Th' blacker the shadder th' plainer it is to be seen, ye know."

Skinny colored up, and the grocer laughed, thinking it all a joke at first, but when Billy asked for a rag he began to wonder what it all meant, and asked:

Billy had an explanation ready made at hand.

"You see," he said, "we are going ter black ourselves up to have some fun with our pards, that's all. Jest a little innocent amusement, as it were. Don't reckon it's against the law, is it?"

"No, I guess not. If you want to daub th' nasty stuff on ye, go ahead, I won't object."

"All right. Now, Skinny, stand up here and let me fresco ye in th' latest approved style."

Skinny made no objections, and Billy proceeded to black him well.

When he had done, Billy and the grocer laughed heartily at his appearance.

"Sweet pertaters!" cried Billy, "but you do cut a figger, Skinny! A blind man could see ye now, thin as ye are. You're blacker'n a black cat in a black alley on a black night."

"Has it improved my 'plexion?" Skinny asked, grinning comically.

"Nobody would take ye fer a blonde, anyhow," Billy assured.

"Well, let me do th' same fer you."

Billy passed over the blacking and the rag, and Skinny set to work.

In about the same length of time Billy was changed into a gentleman of color, and it was Skinny's turn to laugh, which he did heartily enough.

"You are two of a kind, now," observed the storekeeper, "and as black as th' ace o' spades. I'll bet your pards won't know you. I'd be almost willin' ter swear ye ain't th' same lads that kem in here a minute ago."

"That is what we wanted," responded Billy. "Come along heah, you Junius Cashhus," to Skinny, "an' we'll mop off to de ball."

"All right, Pompey Sunbeam, I is wid ye," returned Skinny, and taking Billy's offer of his arm, the two went out, followed by the laughter of the grocer.

They went straight to the saloon, and entered.

It was a dismal-looking den, inside, and not very light. There was a bar near the front, with tables and chairs further back.

At one of the tables, about half-way down the room on the right side, the lads discovered their men, engaged in earnest talk over some sort of drink.

As it happened, their backs were toward the front, and Billy led the way down to the table just behind them, where he and Skinny took seats. The two men did not look up as they did so.

The man behind the bar had eyed them narrowly, however, and now he came out and walked up to the table where they were seated.

"Want anything?" he demanded.

Billy almost forgot his assumed character, and checked himself just in time in his too ready response.

"We's told to meet a man heah," he answered.

"We's got no money, nohow, as we's niggers, so we can't take nuffin'. Mebby Mistah Johnsing will set 'em up when he done git heah. He's got de rocks, sah."

The man went off with a grunt, and Billy turned to Skinny.

"Hope we gits dat job, Junius," he observed.

"Hope we does, Pomp," was the response.

"We is 'way down at de heel."

"Dat's what we am, sbua."

They kept this up for a minute or two, but gradually lapsed into a silent mood in order to try to hear what was being said by the men near them.

Dirty Jack and his companion had glanced around at them once or twice, by this time, but the lads were attending strictly to their own business, so they gave them no further attention.

The men were talking in low tones, but Broadway Billy had keen ears, and when he and Skinny became silent, he could overhear.

"Who told ye?" was the first he heard, a question asked by Antonio.

"Buck Bowie," answered Dirty Jack.

"An' who told him?"

"Captain Unknown himself."

"Then it is all straight, of course."

"Oh, it is straight enough, you needn't doubt that."

"And who is ter lead th' boys, if th' captain ain't on hand himself?"

"Dog's Tail, th' Injun. We're all goin' ter play Injun, you see, to throw th' blame on them if we're seen."

"That ain't a bad idee. Won't Millwall howl, though, if we kin run off a good bunch of his long-horns. He'll be madder'n a crazy tarrantler."

Broadway Billy was on the point of ejaculating—"Sweet pertaters!" but checked himself in time.

He gave Skinny a nudge, which the thin partner returned with interest. They had "got on" to a pretty scheme, and now their "detective fever" burned hotly in their veins. They must know more.

"You bet he will," responded Jack, to Antonio's last observation. "And there will be a stink kicked up, too, you bet. They'll try ter run us down. We'll have to lay low fer a long time, or else light out fer some other part of th' plains where th' Red River Raiders haven't been."

"That is about th' size of it. Wonder why th' captain don't order a raid on Judge Maxwell?"

"Give it up. Th' judge has got a fine herd, and could spare some, I think. I see he is in town— But, we both seen him, didn't we."

"Yes, and that feller Voorbees, too. I hear he's got th' judge in a bad fix, holdin' a big mortgage on his ranch."

"I opine he's stuck on th' judge's gal."

"It looks that way, sure."

Billy and Skinny were exchanging words now and again, as they could, between pauses, so that it might not be suspected that they were listening.

Some unimportant talk followed between the two men, but presently Antonio inquired:

"Did you say that Captain Unknown was to meet you here to-night?"

"Yes, here in this saloon," was the reply. "He didn't say what time, but told me to wait till he got here, anyhow."

"Mebby three will be a crowd when he comes."

"If it is he'll tell you so, that is a sure thing."

"Well, we better be gettin' some grub, hadn't we? Then we kin come back here an' wait."

"I reckon you're about right. Let's go."

They got up, and with only a glance at the two lads, passed out.

"Sweet pertaters!" exclaimed Broadway Billy, in a low tone, "jest hold me fast, will ye, my gay an' festive light-weight? Don't this jest peel th' bark off th' stick? We've got our grip on their p'izen skeen, and if we don't stack their pack for them, as th' boys say, it will be funny."

"But, they didn't say when this raid was to be made, did they?" asked Skinny. "If they did I didn't hear 'em."

"No, they didn't, but we know it ain't goin' ter be to-night, or they wouldn't meet here as we've heard 'em plan."

"And what are we goin' ter do about it?"

"What are we goin' ter do about it? We're goin' ter be present at that meetin' ter see what's in th' wind. I'd like to git a look at that Captain Unknown, as they call him."

"Well, and what then?"

"We'll git all th' p'ints we can, and then tomorrow we'll let no grass grow under our feet in gettin' back to th' ranch and tellin' what we know."

"And then won't there be a time!"

"Well, I should smile. Oh! our fun in Texas isn't played out by any means, my gay an' festive gopher, an' ye mustn't go fer to think it is. Don't faint, little one; that pun slipped in by chance."

"No danger of my faintin' over such a weak one as that. Say, how does your face feel? Mine feels all drawed up."

"Same here. It's th' blackin'. If we don't get wet, and don't git in a sweat over anything, it will stick like wax. But, say, let's be gettin' somethin' to eat ourselves, while we've got th' chance."

"I agree with ye on that."

"We is goin' out fer a snack to eat," Billy explained, as they passed the bar. "If a Mistah Johnsing comes an' axes you if two nigs was heah, you can say dey was, an' dat dey'll be back ag'in pretty presently. Come erlong, Junius Cashhus, an' we'll see what we kin beg, borror or steal, as de circumstances ob de case may detarmin'."

CHAPTER XII.

PICKING UP POINTS.

THE lads passed out unhindered.

As they turned up the street, Skinny observed:

"We can't go to th' hotel in this sort o' war-paint, Billy."

"Right you are, my little man," Billy returned. "We can't go to th' stables in such color, either. We'll drop in at th' store and buy a cracker, though, and make that do duty for th' time bein'."

They went into the store where they had procured their disguises, and made quite a meal on crackers and cheese, Billy joking with the storekeeper all the time.

When they had done they took a stroll about the town, and by the time they got back in the neighborhood of the saloon it was growing dark.

Going in, Billy asked if the "Mistah Johnsing" had been there yet, and was told he had not.

"Well, we'll wait, anyhow," Billy decided.

"He'll be here some time."

They took their former places.

Only a little time had they been there, when Dirty Jack came back and entered.

He, too, took his former place, and settled

down in his chair as though wanting to sleep while he waited.

Billy and Skinny were talking away in the best negro dialect they could assume, and no attention was paid to them.

Half an hour or so passed, when Antonio wandered back into the saloon, and when he had located Dirty Jack he advanced and roused him up.

"Well," Jack demanded, "did you find him?"

"Yes," was the answer, "I found him."

"Well, what did he say?"

"He said th' captain is in town, but didn't know what time he could be here, fer sure. At a guess, though, he named midnight as th' hour."

"Ther deuce he did! Well, I ain't goin' ter stay right here till that time, an' that's straight. Let's go look up some fun."

"There's fun right up at th' hotel where th' judge and Voorbees is. They are playin' again fer high stakes."

"Let's go up there, then, and take it in."

They left the saloon, and in a little while so did Billy and his partner.

Going to the hotel, they found, when they entered the bar-room, that the Mexican's report was true.

Judge Maxwell and Humbert Voorbees were playing, and quite a sum of money lay before them on the table in a pile.

Voorbees was calm and cool, and was lightly smoking a cigar, but the judge was hot and excited, and played with a very nervous hand.

"Judge Maxwell is a very foolish man," observed Billy to Skinny, as they stood looking on from a distance. "Card-playin' is one of th' worst evils I know of," he went on to moralize. "You'll not find yours truly at it, you bet. If you lose, your hard-earned money is gone for nothin', and if ye win, ye put money into yer pocket that you've got no right to. It's a mighty bad business at best, if there is any best to it."

"I reckon you're right," Skinny agreed. "As I don't know how ter play, and have no intentions of learnin', I guess I'm on th' safe side of it."

"And that's th' side ter stay on. I've trained you up so far in th' way you should go, my gentle gazelle, and if you want to stay in partnership with me you have got to live up to my plan. No drinking, no card-playing, no smoking, no swearing, no anything that ain't of any use and ain't goin' to do you any good. But, we understand each other on—Hello! th' judge has lost his pile!"

It was even so.

"Curse the luck!" he cried, springing up, "I have lost every dollar!"

"You would play, sir," reminded Voorbees, coolly. "I tried to keep you from doing so, but you forced it on me, so what could I do? But, here, take your money, and let's stop for the time."

"No, no," the judge refused, "I've lost, and it's yours. If I had another dollar, though, I'd risk it."

"No, for I would play with you no more to-night. Luck is against you, sir, and I don't want to win from you all the time."

Judge Maxwell was pacing the floor, paying no attention to the crowd that stood around, his mind troubled.

He had, with hard work, got together about two thousand dollars, and had come to Bowie with the hope of meeting Voorbees there and winning back what he had lost on other occasions.

Now he was more completely in the power of the fellow than ever. Now there was but the one way out of it. He would have to make his daughter marry him, or else lose his ranch forever. But, his mind had been made up, and this last effort was his last to favor his child.

Suddenly he paused in his walk and faced Voorbees.

"You will be on hand at the time named, at my house, will you?"

"Most assuredly I will, sir."

"Have you seen the lawyer?"

"I have."

"And he will be on hand to fix the matter?"

"He will."

"Very well, you shall have what you have asked, and the whole thing shall be done up in short order. No more sentiment and foolishness now."

Without waiting for any response he went from the room to another part of the house, evidently to his room.

Voorbees looked after him with a smile, and went out.

It seemed to matter little to either of them what the crowd thought of their words.

About this time a young fellow came into the bar-room, one whom Billy and Skinny instantly recognized.

It was Bartolo Tabano, the youth with whom Billy had had the trouble, as shown in previous chapters, and who had afterward been discharged from the ranch, as perhaps we have omitted to state.

His eyes still bore the coloring of that encounter, and the swelling had not all disappeared from his nose and the surrounding territory. He had never been an object of more than passable looks, at his best.

He looked around till his eyes rested upon Dirty Jack and Antonio, when he approached the first-mentioned and handed him a note.

Billy and Skinny were all attention to everything.

Jack opened it and read, and when he had done, proceeded to tear the note into little pieces.

He said something to Antonio, which of course the young detectives could not hear, and throwing the fragments of paper on the floor, the trio passed out.

Broadway Billy set to work immediately to pick up the bits of paper, Skinny aiding, and they did not leave a scrap.

It took them but a few seconds to do it, and they, too, went out.

Dirty Jack and his companions were standing on the opposite corner, talking in an earnest way.

"Where are ye goin', ter read that?" asked Skinny.

"I was jest askin' myself that question," answered Billy. "I guess we'll have ter go back to that saloon again."

"Come along, then, fer I am wild ter know what's in th' note."

"Ha! I knowed th' fever would git at ye in earnest," cried Billy. "Come right along, and we'll see what we kin make out of it."

They set out, and as they passed the place where Dirty Jack and the others were standing, they talked nonsense in negro style for the benefit of their ears.

Entering the saloon, Billy had some more to say to the proprietor about the man they pretended they were waiting for, and then he and Skinny took a seat at a table and set to work, presently, to arrange the fragments of paper in order.

It took them quite a little time to do it, but finally it was done, and this was what they read:

"DEAR JACK:—I have just heard from Buck Bowie that the two boys from Millwall's set out for Bowie this morning. If you see them, find out what their business there is. Don't give them a chance to learn anything. Look out for them! They will upset our plans if they learn anything about them. Can't meet you to-night, but let everything be as it is for the raid on the night of the last day of this month, sure. Go see Dog's Tail. He has full instructions.

"CAPTAIN UNKNOWN."

"Sweet pertaters!" exclaimed Billy when he had read it, "ain't that a dandy little skeem ter try ter work? See th' traitors Mr. Millwall has had among his men, will ye? If there ain't a gay old time when we get home, then I'm no prophet, that's all."

"If we do get home," croaked Skinny.

"There comes your wet blanket again, does it?" Billy scolded. "If ye can't take th' cheerful side of th' matter, don't open yer head at all."

"Ye needn't git mad about it."

"Oh, I ain't mad, but you give me the blind staggers when you draw that long face and take on that funeral look of yours."

"Well, I meant it, anyhow. They will be on th' lookout for us, and we'll have ter keep our eyes open."

"And that's about what we try ter do all th' time, my gay an festive kangaroo, ain't it?"

While talking, Billy was wrapping up the scraps of paper in a piece of newspaper, and when he had done he took off his boot and placed the paper carefully in it.

"That may come in good fer proof," he observed, "so I'll keep it. And now let's mosey out of here and wash up. As there is ter be no session, we needn't wear our fancy color any longer."

"I'm with ye, and I'll be glad enough ter get th' nasty stuff off. Come on, and then we'll get ter bed."

They started out.

"We ain't goin' ter wait no longer fo' dat Mistah Johnsing," Billy said to the proprietor. "He am no good, an' if he comes heah you kin done tell him so, fo' all we-uns keer."

"Who are you, anyhow?" the proprietor demanded, sharply. "I have had my eye on you and I have my suspicions about you."

"Law sakes," ejaculated Billy, opening his eyes to the widest and rolling them ludicrously, "am dat so? Why, we is jes' two 'coons, dat's all, an' we's cousin-in-law to de Topsy what growed."

"You're no more nigger than I am!" the man declared. "Hold on here and give an account of yourselves. Niggers don't have straight hair. I'll see—"

"Ta-ta!" cried Billy, as he and his thin partner sprung out, "we'll see you later, mister whack-em-up!"

With that they were out and off, and when the men in the saloon reached the door the lads were out of sight, having dodged around the first corner they came to in their hasty flight.

But, running out of one danger, they were rushing right into the open arms of another.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PARDS IN A DIFFIKILTY.

The lads paid little attention to where they were going.

They knew that they could not be lost, easily, and if they did, what matter?

When they had gone some distance, and had turned several corners, they dropped to a walk.

"Guess nobody is after us," observed Billy.

"It don't look so, anyhow," said Skinny, in response.

"And what matter if there is? Th' only thing was, to keep out of sight of our enemies."

"That was all, and that was enough. We don't want ter fall inter their hands if we kin help it. Which way are we goin'?"

"I give it up, my hungry coyote, seein' that I didn't bring a chart and compass along. We'll forge ahead, though, and we'll come out all right somewhere or other. Th' town ain't big enough ter lose us very bad."

They pushed ahead in the direction they were going.

It did not take them long to discover that they were in a decidedly bad quarter of the town.

"This ain't no very savory section of th' camp, I reckon," Billy commented. "We won't lose nothin' by gittin' out of it as soon as we can."

"I guess th' place is no worse-lookin' than we are ourselves, at present," Skinny put in. "Nobody is likely ter harm two such mokes as we appear ter be. But I'll be glad ter get out an'—"

"Sweet pertaters!"

That exclamation suddenly interrupted.

"What was it?" asked Skinny, looking to see what had happened.

"Why, if that feller that dodged around th' corner wasn't Barty Tabano, then I am a jack-rabbit."

"Is that so? What was he doin' here? Did he see us?"

"I reckon he did, and what's more, I believe he has got onto us, too. You see, he knows us well, and our clothes would give us away. It was a wonder that Dirty Jack didn't get on to us."

"He never thought of seein' us here, or he would, sure."

"That was what I said in th' first place. Well, we'll git back to th' hotel as soon as we can, and be out of their reach till mornin', anyhow."

"We'll have ter ask th' way, unless you know where we are better than I do."

"We'll ask th' first man we meet, fer I—"

He got no further.

Half a dozen hands seized the lads from behind, and in a moment they were tripped up, lifted off the ground, and carried bodily into a house at hand.

Not even a chance had they been allowed to cry out for help, for the men who had captured them had taken care to stop their mouths at once, and the struggles of the lads were of no avail.

It was about the neatest capture Broadway Billy had ever experienced.

He had not heard a sound, nor had there been a warning of any sort. It was all done quickly and well.

Strangest of all, to the two lads, was the fact that even while they were being carried into the house they did not hear any footsteps of their captors, unless now and then a scrape or shuffle.

The interior of the building was inky black, at first, but soon a door was opened at the end of a hall, and the two prisoners could see what manner of den they were in, as far as they had gone.

It was a dingy, dirty hallway, uncarpeted, with a flight of greasy-looking stairs leading to rooms above.

As soon as the door was opened, the men carried their prisoners along the hall and into the room, where, as soon as they had disarmed them, they gave them their liberty so far as concerned the use of limbs and tongue.

"Sweet pertaters!" cried Billy, without any attempt at carrying his poor disguise further, "but this is another sort o' way of invitin' a feller into yer house. What is th' meanin' of it, anyhow?"

He glanced around at his captors as he made the demand.

There were six of them—or seven, counting the Mexican youth, Bartolo.

There was Dirty Jack, backed by Antonio the Mexican and four others, all about as villainous-looking rascals as the two lads had ever met.

Several of the fellows had their weapons in hand, and the feet of all were muffled by being wrapped in pieces of blanket. They were laughing heartily, partly at the appearance of the lads, and partly over the neatness of their capture.

"It means that you're in a bad box," responded Bartolo. "I told ye I'd get even with ye, and I reckon I have."

"And it means that your little jig is up," put in Dirty Jack. "You was tryin' ter spy on me and my pard in th' saloon, but we have got ye now."

"Have it yer own way," said Billy, defiantly. "When is our funeral ter be held, anyhow? We want ter be on hand, ye know."

"You'll be there, so don't worry about that," was the retort. "You kin make out ter be as bold as ye want ter, but that won't help yer case any."

"What are ye goin' ter do with us?"

"That depends."

"What does it 'pend on?" queried Skinny.

"It depends on how you answer a question or two, that's all."

"Fire in your questions, then," Billy invited.

"What brought ye to this town?" Dirty Jack inquired.

"Our horses," was the prompt answer.

"I mean what business," Jack snapped.

"No business of yours, anyhow," Billy fired back.

"We're goin' ter make it our business, though, jest th' same."

"Go ahead and do it, then. You'll find that you've got two of th' toughest nuts between yer jaws that ye ever tried ter crack in yer life, that's all."

"You talk purty big, but we'll take all of that out of ye. Be ye goin' to answer my question?"

"Not any more'n I have," declared Billy. "It's none of your business what we came here for, and you can make th' most of it at that."

"We'll show ye about that, my beauties."

There was one of the four with Jack and Antonio that Billy was sure he had seen before, and he was trying hard to think where.

Suddenly it came to him. It was he fellow who had taken his horse and Skinny's at the hotel stables.

As Dirty Jack uttered his last-quoted words, he turned to this fellow.

"You go and git their horses," he ordered. "and we'll be off with 'm to th' camp, and there we'll burn 'em alive if they won't talk."

That man left the house, and the others were directed to tie the lads' hands behind them.

This was speedily done, and leaving Bartolo Tabano to guard them, armed with a revolver in each hand, and with orders to shoot them if they tried to get away, the others went out.

"Didn't I tell ye that I'd fix ye yet?" the young Mexican demanded.

"Do you call us fixed, jest 'cause we're in a little diffikilty like this?" inquired Billy.

"I should say so," Bartolo chuckled. "You are as good as done fer, if you only knowed it. And you kin thank me fer gittin' ye into th' trap, too."

"Why, how was that?"

"It was me that put Jack onto you."

"Well, what are they goin' ter do with' us, now that they've got us?" Billy asked.

"You'll see soon enough. I reckon they'll hand ye over to th' Injuns, and let them roast ye alive and eat ye."

"What a shocking thing that will be!" cried Billy, in mock terror. "Skinny, don't it most scare ye inter fits? It makes my flesh creep ter think of it. Oh! Toby, won't ye let us go? Please do! Come, there's a dear, good little Greaser. Well, you have somethin' ter be thankful fer anyhow, Skinny."

"What is that?" Skinny asked.

"You won't suffer much, not near as much as I will."

"What's th' reason I won't, I'd like ter know."

"Cause there ain't as much of ye, and you'll be soon cooked and out of your misery. It won't take more'n a minute or two to broil you nicely done."

"Oh, you shut up and git out."

"I'd be willin' ter shut up if I could git out, and that's a fack. But it ain't ter be thought of. Toby's off eye is full of shoot. By th' way, Toby, are Injuns fond of soup?"

"I don't know nothin' about it."

"I was goin' ter say that mebby Skinny could serve them that way better than any other, and tickle their palates more."

"You had better attend to your own case, and let mine alone," snapped Skinny. "I think they'll want ter boil your head with pork."

"What would they do that for?"

"That's th' usual way of cookin' a head of cabbage."

So they kept it up, much to the amusement of their guard, until the return of the men.

Billy had hoped that something would turn up to favor their escape, but nothing did, and the Mexican youth kept them well covered all the time.

The tr. ad of horses was heard, and then the men came in.

"Now," cried Dirty Jack, we're ready fer ye, my lads, and you've got ter come along with us. Jest see to gaggin' 'em, boys."

Resistance was useless, so Billy and his slender partner submitted to that operation with as good grace as possible.

"And now we'll be off," declared Dirty Jack. "We'll introduce you to some thoroughbred Comanche Indians afore daylight, and see how you'll like them. This will be about your last adventure, I can tell you now."

Billy would have made answer, of course, if he had had the use of his tongue, but as he had not he was silent because he had to be.

The light was put out, and the lads were led from the house, two men holding each of them.

Horses were waiting in front, and Billy and his partner were helped into the saddles of their own animals, the men vaulting upon their horses immediately, and the little party started forward at a walk.

It was past midnight, now, and the streets were about deserted, and the horsemen taking all the back ways they could, were soon out upon the plains without having met any one, and without a challenge.

Then they spurred their horses and went forward at a swinging gallop.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE PARDS AT THE STAKE.

THEY were some hours in the saddle.

Broadway Billy noted by the stars that they were going in a northwest direction. His sea voyage had given him sufficient star lore for that. Indeed, there was a good deal of useful knowledge stored away in his head for future emergencies.

Finally they rode into some rocky and broken hills, entered a narrow defile, and presently emerged into a glade where fires were dimly burning.

Here they soon met a challenge.

"Hold up thar and say who ye be!" was the order.

The party drew rein, and Dirty Jack answered the challenge.

"They were allowed to pass on, and were soon in the camp of Indians and outlaws."

In a moment the camp was awake, the fires were stirred up, and a short, bow-legged and thick-necked Indian strutted forward to greet the party.

He shook hands with Dirty Jack, and the latter said:

"Glad ter see ye again, Dog's Tail. We have brought ye some prisoners. Captain Unknown wants 'em kept safe here."

"How! it shall be done," the Indian exclaimed, in good-enough English.

The party had all dismounted, now, and Billy and Skinny were helped to the ground.

They were rather stiff, for having their hands tied they had not been able to ride with any degree of ease.

Dirty Jack and Dog's Tail walked off, but Jack turned back to order that the gags be taken out of the boys' mouths.

That was speedily done, and young Bartolo Tabano stepped up and demanded:

"What d'ye think of it now?"

"If I had my hands loose about one minute

I'd show you," snapped Billy, who was in no good temper.

"Oh, ye would, would ye? Well, take that ter remember me by, anyhow."

The lad made a slap at Billy's head as he uttered the words, but the blow did not take effect. Billy ducked neatly, and the fellow's arm passed harmlessly over his head.

And then something else happened. The force of the blow turned Bartolo around, and Billy kicked him with all the force he could, lifting him clear of the ground, and sending him sprawling forward upon his hands and knees.

It was so neatly done that it called forth a howl of laughter from all who saw it.

The young Mexican bounded up, howling with rage, and made a rush at Billy that meant mischief. There was a wicked gleam in his eyes, and his hand rested upon a knife.

Billy did not move, and no one offered to interfere.

On the fellow rushed, but as soon as he came within reach, up went Billy's leg, and planting his foot upon Bartolo's breast with force, he sent him spinning backward to the ground, where he fell and lay motionless.

Dog's Tail and Dirty Jack had turned back, at the sound of the laughter, and the Indian chief now ordered the lads taken away.

Rough hands were laid upon them, and they were dragged to a distance, and made to sit down with their backs to a stake, to which they were tied.

There they were left alone to talk over their pleasant situation at leisure.

They had been very sleepy, on the way over the plain, but now were wide awake enough, and a faint glow in the east told of daylight coming.

"What do you think of it now, Skinny?" Billy asked.

"I think we are done for," was the doleful reply. "I'd give anything to be in my own cock-loft bed in New York at this minute."

"Vain wish, my melancholy Dane. We're here, in th' bands of th' Philistines as it were. Th' question that now comes up fer debate is, how are we goin' to get away?"

"There is no get away to it," Skinny complained. "This is to be our last day, Billy; I feel it in my bones."

"Ye feel it in yer bones, eh? There's nothin' else of ye to feel it in, is there? But, you allus look on th' dark side of the nigger. Haven't we been in fixes as bad before? And haven't we got out of 'em every time? We'll come out right-side up with care, you bet!"

"Yes, we'll be carried out and planted, that's how we'll come out. We've got to th' end of our rope at last, and all your fault."

"Sweet pertaters! I hope it won't come to that, Skinny! But, I won't believe it till it happens, anyhow. No sir-ee. We'll get out somehow, my slender sapling, and you want to keep right on thinking so."

They talked on, and daylight came at length, and in due time the sun looked into the little valley.

The camp was up and astir now, and preparations were being made for breakfast.

Dirty Jack and Dog's Tail walked over to where the lads were tied, and Jack inquired how they felt.

"We'd feel a heap better," answered Billy, "if we could wash up and get this black off us, and have some grub."

"We'll give you a chance to do that," the rascal granted. "We'll put men to watch you while you are free, though, so it won't be any use for you to try to run away. Here, you Ben and Mike, let these fellows loose for an hour, and let 'em wash up and get some grub."

Two hard-looking fellows came forward at the call, and Billy and his thin comrade were set free.

"If they try to escape," Dog's Tail further ordered, "shoot them as you would shoot a coyote."

"Yer kin bet we will," declared Mike.

There was a little stream flowing through the valley glade, and the lads made their way to that at once, and there proceeded to wash off the blacking they had carried so many hours.

They found it a hard and disagreeable task, but finally, helping each other at it, it was accomplished.

That done, they were given something to eat, and were allowed the limited freedom of the camp for about an hour, when they were again bound to the stake.

The young Mexican Bartolo, was around, and cast looks of hatred at his enemy.

He had been forbid to harm the lads, and did not dare do so, openly.

Some time along in the forenoon an excitement arose in the camp, as a horseman was seen coming up the glade out of the defile.

When he came near, Billy and Skinny could see that he wore a mask, and they heard him spoken of as Captain Unknown, even before he reached the camp.

"It is th' pizen boss devil himself," observed Billy.

"Reckon it is," agreed Skinny. "Now we have got ter face th' music."

"Th' doleful Dead March in Saul, fer instance, eh?"

"It's nothin' ter joke over, it ain't."

"I guess you're about right."

Captain Unknown came on, and as soon as he rode into the camp he sprung from his horse and was greeted by Dirty Jack and Dog's Tail.

The leader of the outlaws had a brief conference with the Indian and Jack, and the three crossed over to where Billy and Skinny were bound.

Unknown was masked completely, so that no part of his face could be seen, and was clad in a suit of rough material. His hands were not gloved, however, and Billy saw at a glance that they were small and shapely.

"What business took you two boys to Bowie?" he sharply demanded.

"We don't keep intelligence on tap here," responded Billy, coolly.

"I demand an answer," was the stern rejoinder.

"That don't alter th' facts of th' case any," Billy averred. "It's nobody's business what we went there for."

"It isn't, eh? We'll see about that. Dog's Tail, let your braves prepare a stake and burn 'em alive. We'll see how that will work."

"Go ahead with th' funeral," rejoined Billy, defiantly. "You'll find that we'll die game, if you mean business. If it's only a scare, you'll find that we don't scare worth a cent. We've seen cut-throats afore this."

"There is no scare about it," the captain assured. "Go ahead, Dog's Tail, and roast them alive."

Billy was paying keen attention to the outlaw captain's voice. He felt sure he had heard it before, but where?

Suddenly it came to him, and his usual exclamation popped out with startling vim. He had made a big discovery.

Skinny looked at him in surprise, when he uttered the exclamation, but Billy did not enlighten him then. Later he told him, to his amazement.

Captain Unknown, Dog's Tail and Dirty Jack went away, and the Indian gave some orders to his followers that set them to whooping and cheering wildly, and a dozen or so of them surrounded the stake where the lads were and proceeded to dance some sort of outlandish dance.

Others of the Indians procured another stake and set it up at a little distance away, and when it was ready the dancers stopped in their antics and releasing the lads from where they were, led them to the other stake and tied them to it, back to back.

By this time a quantity of wood and light stuff had been brought, and this was speedily piled up around them.

"Keep up yer nerve, Skinny," Billy whispered. "Don't show th' white feather, my slender chum."

"I won't holler till you do," Skinny declared.

"That's all I ask ye."

When all had been made ready, Captain Unknown and the others ranged themselves in a circle around the stake, and some of the Indians stood ready with brands in hand to fire the wood.

"Now, young fellows," spoke Captain Unknown, "if you will answer my questions, and tell the business that took you to Bowie, we will spare your lives. If you refuse I will allow these Indians to burn you."

"Let th' good work go on," Billy invited, nonchalantly.

"You are cold about now, but you'll change your tune when you feel the fire licking your flesh."

"There's a big chance fer you ter be mistaken," Billy declared. "If you mean business your man may as well get to work. You won't get anything out of us."

"Your partner may be of a different mind."

"You kin bet your boots that he ain't, then," Skinny declared.

"Bully fer you!" cried Billy. "Keep yer grit, little one, and if I don't live ter reward ye, the country will."

"Do you positively refuse to tell me what I want to know?" the outlaw chief demanded.

"If necessary, I'll take my after-David to it,"

Billy assured. "You won't get any information out o' us, so ye may as well go on with th' picnic."

Captain Unknown gave the signal, and with fiendish yells the Indians sprung forward and set fire to the stuff around the stake.

CHAPTER XV.

PREPARING TO ROUND UP.

THE New York lad knew not what to think, for, up to this time he had not believed that it was meant.

He had no idea the rascals would carry out their diabolical threat to the letter.

As for Skinny, his eyes were bulging out wildly, but he meant to hold out as long as Billy did. If they got out of trouble, it would never do for Billy to have it to say that he weakened under the test.

It took but a moment for the fire to begin to feel uncomfortably warm around them, and, as it did so, Billy made up his mind.

He closed his eyes, laid back his head, and resolved that he would not move out of that position no matter how far it went. And he had the grit to do it.

"Grin and bear it, pard!" he whispered to Skinny, "but, don't weaken. If it's roast, roast let it be. Don't weaken. Bartolo is lookin', and we won't let him say that we called fer mercy."

"One more chance," called out Captain Unknown. "Will you answer my questions? If you will, I will order the fire kicked away from you. There is time, if you speak up quick. What do you say?"

"Nary answer," returned Billy, coolly. "Let th' funeral go on."

Even as he uttered the words, the angry fire was licking at one of his legs, having burned a hole through his trowsers.

"Curse you!" the outlaw chief cried, "what are you made of, anyhow? Away with the fire, or it will be too late!"

With a bound the Indians scattered the wood away, and the lads were safe, except some comparatively slight burns.

"What's bu'sted?" asked Billy, in a tone of lazy surprise. "Why don't ye go on with th' circus? You are cheatin' yerselves out of lots o' fun. You'd better fire up again, and have it out."

"Ugh! heap brave," exclaimed Dog's Tail, and he meant it.

Bartolo was looking on with eyes dilated. Here was a specimen of grit such as he had never dreamed of, and it was about the same with Dirty Jack, Antonio, and all the rest of the evil-looking herd. They were amazed.

"What will ye do with 'em now?" asked Jack.

"I'll have to think," was the growl. "Tie them up again."

The lads were returned to the stake where they had been, and there left.

In about an hour Captain Unknown rode away, and the camp settled down to a state of sleepy laziness. Billy and Skinny were given something to eat, when the others ate, and then the afternoon dragged slowly enough with them.

They talked, of course, and Billy was not idle, in another way. He was rubbing his wrists up and down the pole, carefully, whenever he had opportunity to do so unobserved.

Night came on, finally, and the lads were sleepy enough, having taken but one or two brief naps during the day, but now they were intent only upon getting free. They had planned their escape.

They were both hard at work, trying to wear their bonds against the stake so that they would break, when a dark form crept toward them, stealthily, and just as Billy felt the cords snap asunder and his hands freed.

"Who is that?" Billy asked in whisper.

"It ain't no friend, anyhow," was the whispered answer.

Billy recognized the voice as that of the Mexican lad, Bartolo!

"What d'ye want, then?" Billy demanded.

"I'm goin' ter give ye somethin' ter remember me by," was the response, as the young rascal crouched before his enemy. "They are goin' ter take ye away north to-night, and lose ye so's ye can't find yer way back. I'm goin' ter take one of yer eyes afore ye go, so's ye won't forget me."

"Well, that's cool, anyhow," declared Billy. "That is about as mean a thing as you could do. Better kill me and have done with it. I wouldn't blind a mad-dog."

"So much th' better th' revenge, then."

"But, what if I object?"

"You're tied, so you can't help yourself."

"Which makes it all th' meaner on your part."

Why, you nasty Greaser, I can't hardly believe you mean it, mean as a Greaser is."

"I'll show ye about that, and mighty soon."

He leaned forward and Billy caught the gleam of a knife in his hand.

The next instant Billy was upon him with all his strength, and the fellow was carried over and laid on his back, Billy's fingers at his throat and the knife hand held as in a vise.

"Not this evening, I guess," he said, grimly.

"Drop that knife, or I'll choke th' life right out of you, you rattlesnake!"

The knife was allowed to fall, and taking it, Billy reached over and freed his thin partner.

"Come help me bind him," he whispered, "and we'll have th' bulge on him in th' worst kind o' way."

Skinny lent his aid immediately, and in a very brief while Bartolo was even more securely bound than Billy and his "pard" had been.

"There, how d'ye like that?" Billy demanded.

"As you're gagged, of course you can't tell us, but we'll take it fer granted that ye don't like it purty well. We won't ask ye to keep still, fer ye can't help yerself; and now, we'll bid ye adieu."

Billy had relieved him of his weapons, and he and Skinny crept away in the darkness toward the creek, or little brook.

Fortunately they were not seen, and when they reached the stream they stepped into it and waded down.

The stream ran through the defile that has been mentioned, and the lads did not leave it until they had gone more than a mile. Finally they went up out of it, on a rocky shelf, and when Billy had taken their bearings by the stars, they set out in the direction of the Millwall Ranch, as nearly as they could tell.

Up to this time they had expected to hear the Indians after them, but not a sound came to their ears, nor did any alarm reach them.

In truth, their escape was not discovered until some two hours after they had gone and they were several miles away. Of course the whole outlaw camp was then in an uproar, and a thorough search was made, but amounted to nothing.

And all the time the two lads were trudging manfully on. They had had no rest, to amount to anything, for forty hours, and were well nigh exhausted, but they knew the importance of their reaching home as soon as possible, and braced up their nerves for the task before them.

When they had walked several hours, holding to the one direction all the time, they finally saw a light a little to the right of their course, and headed toward it.

They found it came from a ranch house, and Billy knocked at the door.

Presently a head appeared at the window from which the light was shining, and a voice demanded to know who was there.

"We are two lads who have lost our way," Billy answered. "We want to find the Millwall Ranch. Can you tell us how far we are from there, and which direction to go?"

"I can do better than that," was the response. "Are you Billy and Skinny, the two boys at Millwall's?"

"That's who we are," Billy assured. "Who are you?"

"I'm John Dixon, and you're at Dixon's Ranch."

"Sweet pertsers! is that so?"

The head disappeared, and the door was soon opened.

"You come in and stay th' rest of th' night," the ranchman invited, "and in th' mornin' I'll set you on th' right trail."

"Can't do it, nohow," Billy declared, and he went ahead, then, and told all about his adventures and the danger that threatened the Millwall Ranch.

The Dixon Ranch was forty miles from the Millwall place, and it would have taken the lads all the rest of the night and some hours of the forenoon to reach there on foot.

But, they did not have to walk. Mr. Dixon furnished them with horses, and sent one of his men with them.

When they set out, too, he bade them tell Mr. Millwall that he would raise a force of men and come over to his aid.

The sun was just taking his morning look across the plains when they reached the Millwall Ranch.

It took but a few minutes for the lads to make their arrival known, and Mr. Millwall was soon out.

"Where in wonders have you been?" he asked.

"What has happened? I sent Waco Will to Bowie last night to look for you."

Billy rattled off his story in "short meter," as he said, giving the facts as known to the reader.

And that done, Billy and Skinny sought what they were in need of—sleep.

They did not wake up once until they were called, in time for supper, and perhaps would have slept right on all night, but Billy had given positive directions to the little black-eyed girl, Petala, not to let him miss his supper.

He wanted to be on hand for the fun that was in prospect for that night.

When the lads went in to supper they found Lawyer Higgsworth on hand at the table.

"Ha!" the lawyer exclaimed, "here you are, eh, lad?"

"Here I am, what's left of me," Billy responded. "Reckon if I'd slept on I'd slept myself all away."

"You certainly earned the rest," observed the cattle-king.

"Has Waco Will got back?" asked Billy.

"No, he has not returned yet," was the answer. "I suppose he is scouring Bowie to find some trace of you."

"Which he won't find. If they had murdered us, our disappearance would have been a big puzzle to you all. But, say, are ye fixed fer the reception of the raiders?"

"They will find out when they come," was the grim response. "We will have a force big enough to scoop them all in. You have done a big thing for us, my lad, in getting at their plans."

"I hope ye bag 'em," Billy declared. "I've got another gun to shoot, though, and one that may s'prise ye some when it goes off. Are ye goin' over to th' Maxwell Ranch to-night?"

"Yes, we are going over right after supper," Millwall answered.

"Good enough. I'm goin' to invite myself and Skinny to go along. We won't go till after dark, though, and we'll keep out o' sight till we enter th' house. I've got a request ter make."

"And what is that?"

"That you'll let me and my partner into th' room with th' rest of th' company when we get there."

"It shall be done."

CHAPTER XVI.

BAGGING THE RAIDERS.

THROUGH some delay, it was nearly dark when the party set out.

It consisted of Mr. and Mrs. Millwall, the lawyer, and one or two others.

As soon as it was dark Billy and Skinny followed, and when they arrived at the ranch they approached from the rear.

They were readily admitted, and Billy asked some questions of the servants to "get the lay of the land," as he expressed it. He found that the Millwalls and Judge Maxwell were in consultation with the lawyer, and that Voorbees had not yet arrived.

Billy had a message to deliver to Vida Maxwell, from Lariat Louie, so he asked for her and she soon came.

Louie had charge of the force that was to meet and attempt the capture of the outlaws, and his message was to the effect that if Vida found it necessary to claim his protection, she should accompany the Millwalls home.

While Billy and Vida were talking, Humbert Voorbees arrived.

He entered the house with all the show of airs he could well carry, and asked for Vida.

He was shown into the parlor.

In a little while the rest of the company went in.

Judge Maxwell led the way, and after him went his daughter. The others followed after, Billy and Skinny bringing up the rear.

Voorbees had risen with his usual airs, as the door opened, but at sight of the unlooked-for company he could only stare, his face paling.

"Good-evening, Humbert," the judge greeted.

"Good-evening, Judge Maxwell," the man responded, trying to recover his nerve. "I am happy to see you looking so well. And you, Miss Maxwell, you grow more and more charming with every passing hour."

He bowed and scraped and spoke to all, Billy and Skinny coming in for a share of his flatteries.

When the company were seated, except Vida Maxwell, she said:

"Humbert Voorbees, I suppose you are here for the purpose of learning what answer I intend making to your proposal."

"Why—er—yes," Voorbees said, hesitatingly, "but we will defer that for the present. It is hardly—"

"We will not put it off at all," Vida interrupted. "My answer is, sir, that I will not marry you. Nothing could induce me to be-

come your wife. I despise you utterly, and never want to see your face again."

Voorbees's face was deathly pale, and he could hardly control himself as he made response.

"You had better think well before you answer so," he muttered, threateningly. "Remember I have you in my power."

The answer was a look of keenest contempt.

"Humbert Voorbees," said Judge Maxwell, rising, "I am ready to take up that mortgage you hold against me. It is due, and here is the cash to meet it," and he produced the money.

"I won't take it!" the baffled rascal cried, hotly. "There is trickery about all this. I demand your daughter's hand, sir, and I'll take nothing else."

"Pardon me," spoke up the lawyer, "but there is no mention of any such thing in the papers. The papers call for so much money at a certain time. The time is at hand, and so is the money. You must take it."

"But, I won't do it!" the fellow persisted. "Maxwell is a beggar, and this money is not his. He has no right to it, and I won't touch it. I'll foreclose at once and take his place—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the lawyer, "you are beside yourself. If you want this money, take it now. If you don't want it, say so. Your hold upon this ranch is broken, and I am about to turn the papers back to Judge Maxwell."

"You can't do it! I defy you to do it! I won't touch the money, but I will hold on to the mortgage—"

"It will be out of date in six hours—yes, in less than four hours," the lawyer reminded.

There was quite a hot scene, but it ended in the rascal finally taking the money and receipting for it in due form.

"Now," said the lawyer, "we will turn this mortgage over to Mrs. Millwall, in new form and date."

"Ha! it was you, was it!" the rascal grated, looking at Paul.

"No, it was not I, but my wife," was the answer. "You are baffled neatly."

"And it does me good to see it, too," put in Mrs. Millwall. "Your game was a contemptible one, to say the least."

"You shall all pay dear for this," Voorbees grated. "You will find that I am a man not to be trifled with."

"You had better be careful how you threaten," warned Paul, sternly.

All that was needed to transfer the papers, were a few words of writing and the signatures of the parties concerned, and it was done.

Voorbees had not yet taken up the money that lay on the table.

"Now, sir," ordered Judge Maxwell, "take your money and go, and never darken my doors again."

"Jest let me pipe my small voice right here," spoke up Broadway Billy, and he and Skinny strode forward together, both with revolvers drawn and aimed at the head of Voorbees.

That individual's eyes bulged out, and he looked frightened.

"My first chirp," Billy went on, "is, don't you so much as wink your eye, my gallus dude, or you'll find a lead-mine planted in yer vitals in short order."

"What means this outrage?" Voorbees stormed.

"It means real old business, right from th' shoulder!" Billy assured. "Put up your hands, or I'll begin to pump lead in your direction, sure! Up, I say!"

The boy's eyes showed that he did mean business, and the hands went up.

The others looked on in the greatest amazement. What was the meaning of it all, anyhow?

"Friends, feller-citizens and neighbors," said Billy, addressing the little company, "I object to this rascal's walkin'—"

"What!" cried Voorbees, "you speak of me in that way!"

"Exactly," Billy assured. "You are a rascal, and a big one, too. I object to your gettin' off with that boodle. Th' debt was a gamblin' debt, anyhow, and that's one reason. Another reason is, because I won't let ye! That's th' reason that's got th' thorns on, too, you want to remember."

"Billy," spoke Mr. Millwall, "have a care. Don't go too far."

"I'll have a care that he don't get away, you bet!" Billy responded. "This is to be th' night of th' grand round up of th' Red River Raiders, and I'm goin' ter begin it right here. Friends, allow me ter introduce to you Captain Unknown, th' captain of th' outlaw band."

"It's a lie!" Voorbees screamed, springing up.

As he leaped to his feet his hand fell upon a

revolver, but, in the same moment the door was flung open and into the room bounded Waco Will, with a deputy sheriff at his back.

In ten seconds more the outlaw was bound, hands and feet, and then proof was presented that could not be doubted.

Humbert Voorbees and Captain Unknown were one and the same!

The proof was so positive that it was not to be doubted, and the rascal finally admitted the fact.

Mr. Millwall immediately gathered up the money on the table, handed it to his wife, and took the mortgage papers and burned them.

"Judge Maxwell," he said, "your ranch is free and clear. See that in the future you keep it so."

Billy had quietly sent another messenger after Waco Will, with instructions where and how to get proof, and directed him to bring a deputy sheriff with him on his return.

We scarcely need add that Billy and his partner were again the heroes of the hour.

Leaving the prisoner under strong guard, Mr. Millwall, the lads, and Waco Will, all went over to the Millwall Ranch to see how the matter there would come out.

It was about midnight before anything happened, but when it did happen it was with suddenness that was surprising. The outposts began to fire; there was a rush from every direction, and in a few moments the outlaw horde was surrounded on all sides, and a lively fight was in progress.

It ended in the surrender of the raiders, when a dozen or more of them had been killed, and they were soon taken prisoners.

Only four or five of the cowboys had been wounded, and none killed.

It was a signal victory for the ranchmen.

The honor was given to Prince Billy and his slender partner.

Captain Unknown, but unknown no longer, was lodged in jail, with a dismal prospect before his.

Dirty Jack, Dog's Tail, Antonio and the lad Bartolo were killed in the fight, while Buck Bowie shares the fate of his captain.

Many of the others, too, are in the same fix.

A few got away, but they were only the minor rascals, and it is probable that they will never trouble that neighborhood with their presence again.

Before the month was out there was a double wedding.

One party consisted of Lariat Louie and Vida Maxwell, and the other of Waco Will and Petala Vickers.

Prince Billy and his thin partner were in high feather on the occasion.

Judge Maxwell admitted that Louie was a fellow he liked, anyhow. And the judge says, also, that he is done with card-playing. He will never risk his ranch again.

By the way, his foreman, Chico Sam, disappeared suddenly after the raid.

He evidently had cause to fear something.

Judge Maxwell never let out the secret that he had been at the bottom of the stampede. He had hoped by that means to win the discharge of Lariat Louie, and so get him out of the way of Voorbees.

When their six months' stay was up, Billy and Skinny decided that they must go away; they had played long enough.

They were pressed hard to stay, Maxwell offering finally to employ them both at splendid pay, but they would not accept.

"We have got to keep moving," Billy declared, "or we'll never reach home. We will be old men by th' time we get there, as it is, if we stop six months at every place. It can't be done. We must go, boss!"

They were splendidly equipped and departed, with the hearty best wishes of all.

They sent their trunk to Denver by Express, with orders for it to be held there till called for, and, mounting their horses, set out to do the distance on horseback, by way of Santa Fe, New Mexico.

"We can't get lost while we're on Uncle Sam's ground," Billy declared at parting. "We set out to see th' sights, and we mean to do it if it takes another six months. We'll let ye hear from us, once in a while, and you'll find that we are all wool and as wide as th' widest. What is more, if any rascality drops down in our way, we'll give it a high old rustle, you bet!"

So they rode away, leaving behind them a host of warm friends.

THE END.

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